

LEARNING

HOW
TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 3, Episode 7

Christianity as a
Road We Make By Walking

Brian: In season one of Learning How to See, we looked at the subject of biases, and we returned to it in season two. We tried to develop a skill for challenging our biases and our preconceived notions. We're practicing, learning how to see from different perspectives, learning how to hold tensions. And that skill is very important in today's episode. One person can say "Christianity saved my life. It's the best thing that ever happened to me." And another person can say "Christianity ruined my life. It's the worst thing that ever happened to me." And still another person could say "For 10 years, Christianity was the best thing, then it became the worst thing, then it became the best thing again." How can we see Christianity as being different things to different people or being different things at different times?

How can we see Christianity as something in the making, something that's not a finished product, something that is continually being remade by each new generation of adherence? That's what we're going to explore today in Learning How to See. How to see Christianity as a road we make by walking. On this final episode of season three, we will be joined by my friend Tripp Fuller. Tripp is a delightful human being, as you're about to see, an incredible conversationalist and a really important theologian.

For over a decade now, Tripp has been bringing together many of the most brilliant theological voices from the academy and interviewing them online through his podcast, HomeBrewed Christianity, and helping their wisdom and insight become accessible to the rest of us who aren't necessarily part of the academy. I know you're going to enjoy meeting Tripp and I hope you'll get to know him in his many other roles as a speaker, as a thinker, as a gifted author himself, and as a convener of needed conversations about what Christianity was, is, and can be. Here is a passage from Do I Stay Christian?

In this light, Christianity looks very different to me. Instead of an old mature, fully formed, maybe even worn out religion, I see it as a religion still in its earliest infancy. And that raises a new question for me. If I leave the Christian community in conversation, will I be abandoning an infant, speaking in terms of deep evolutionary time? I remind myself, the universe isn't in a hurry by human standards. It has been unfolding and expanding, diversifying, and beautifying in its current form for 13.7 billion years. I remind myself, if we compressed the universe's whole existence into one year, our planet doesn't even form until September 11th. The first forms of life don't emerge on earth until around September 30th, but no multicellular organisms evolve until December 14th. The dinosaurs rule the earth from December 27th to 30th. And the first humans don't appear until December 31st at 11:39 PM. Jesus comes on the scene at 11:59:56, which means that all of Christianity has existed for a mirror four seconds, four seconds.

Or to frame it differently, if we say that modern humans have been around for 200,000 years, Christianity has been around for 1% of our species history. Yes, for better and for worse, as we've seen, the religion made a big splash in a relatively short time. But imagine two scenarios. First, imagine that human civilization led by its largest living religion destroys itself in the next century or two. Wouldn't you have to be suspicious at least that a species that survived for 198,000 years without Christianity could only last 2000 years with it? That's not a great reflection on Christianity. But conversely, imagine that somehow we reverse our accelerating slide into catastrophic climate change and environmental overshoot. Then imagine that we reverse the accelerating concentration of money, power, and weapons in a tiny group of hyper elite oligarchs. And then imagine that we manage to keep those

super rich oligarchs from using their growing cash of weapons to plunge us into a mushroom cloud of mutually assured destruction. In that light, imagine that the human race lives for another 200,000 years.

Brian: Looking back from that vantage point in the 2020s, the first 2000 years of Christian history will be to our descendants only 1% of Christian history, proportional to what the first 20 years of Christianity are to us. If you are familiar with Christian history, you already know that we know next to nothing about the first 20 years after Jesus crucifixion, except this: it was very unlike what we call Christianity today. There were no church buildings, no denominations or celibate clergy, and really no clergy at all as we know it, no formal creeds or systematic theologies, no organs or Sunday school programs, no annual celebration of Christmas or Easter.

It was a 20 year old movement, younger to me as I write than the Civil Rights Movement and the Environmental Movement. Just twice as old as the Black Lives Matter Movement and a bit older than the Me Too Movement. So I ask myself again, why should I leave a religion in its infancy? Wouldn't that be like giving up on a baby because after 10 months she still can't walk, talk in complete sentences, read, do basic algebra or even poop in the potty? Wouldn't I be wiser to redouble my efforts to help this fledgling religion, learn to walk, stop biting its playmates and feed itself.

Brian: Well, everyone, I'm so happy to be in this conversation with Tripp Fuller. Tripp, we've known each other, were you a graduate student when I met you or were you undergraduate?

Tripp: Oh, it's been long enough, Brian. I don't quite remember, but it was definitely early 20s at the latest.

Brian: Yes. And I've said this to you Tripp, but I want to say it for other people to hear. Tripp started a podcast called HomeBrewed Christianity. And he has been interviewing the greatest living theologians and philosophers since 2008, if I'm remembering correctly.

Tripp: Yeah. Yesterday was the 14th birthday of the podcast.

Brian: That's amazing. Literally there are hundreds of hours of engaging conversation with, I think the world's leading theologians. To me, this is just so significant. I think about for Protestants will be familiar with the story of Martin Luther posting 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg cathedral, which is very possibly apocryphal story. But the idea that he used an old technology ink on paper to stick on a door and then followed it up with a new technology of the printing press, I just think that whatever kind of reformation and Renaissance is happening now, Tripp has done an incredible service to the process by this amazing HomeBrewed Christianity podcast. Hey Tripp, I wondered if you could maybe tell everybody two things about you that they might not know, one personal and one professional. Anything that comes to mind.

Tripp: Personal, well, I'm really, really into a few things and then whatever they are, I go all in and that's my personality. Like when I got into home brewing, I started competing and wanted to win. I like J. R. Tolkien, like the kind of person that rereads it all regularly. I love the Dodgers and Lakers. And so I get the apps for the sports, but the kind of subscription where you really are just paying to watch one team, not them all. And then I listen to podcast

about them. That's my energy on anything I'm meant to. Which leads to you like theology and then you're like, "So there's this way that I can go interview people." I would say the professional part is that kind of, you get into something, you love it and then you want to find other people that love it and then tell other people that this is really cool.

Tripp: The podcast has turned into what my vocation is. After spending 14 years as an academic and a podcaster, the podcasting has continued to grow. I really dig it. And I think most people that before had really big questions and things that would shake them up, a hundred years ago, they're like the few people that went and had liberal arts degrees and that kind of stuff. And then they would go to seminary and all that kind of thing. Now, almost anyone that pays attention and ask questions has the kind of intellectual baggage and questions and stuff to wrestle with, but they aren't vocationally needing the debt and investment in seminary.

Tripp: I found that my passion and care about it has led to being able to give people an audio version of some of the stuff that happens in graduate school. It's positive because there are more and more Christians asking the kind of questions that one Sunday school class, or a sermon or something doesn't answer directly. You need the space of a podcast, of our online reading groups and stuff like you've done before with me. Yeah, I really like it. And the more people that can get it without a large number of student loans or the more disciples that have more available options when it goes to materializing fidelity in the world.

Brian: Oh, that's great. That's great. Well, as you know, in this season of Learning How to See, we're talking about learning, how to see Christianity, looking at Christian faith in a new and fresh perspective or perspectives. And for a lot of people, Christianity is a fully defined thing. Somebody defined it for them, a priest, a pastor, a denomination. It's this permanent thing with a deep divinely established essence that can't be tampered with. And more and more of us are coming to realize that Christianity like everything else in the world is something in process. It's always been changing. It's changing right now. I earlier read to everyone, a couple of paragraphs from your beautiful book, Divine Self Investment. And I just want to read a sentence or two and invite you to just riff and build on that a little bit, Tripp. You were talking about Peter's confession of Christ in the gospels, where he says, "I believe you are the Christ, the son of the living God."

Brian: And you wrote, "Recognizing that the content of the confession was a work in progress for the disciples themselves, can free us up to seize and celebrate our location as disciples of Christ today, while expecting, and even anticipating an ongoing process of growing in understanding. This means that every constructive Christological proposal can come both from a genuine faith and anticipate that continued faithfulness will lead to its deconstruction. It is always the call toward a more beautiful true, and just Christological form." And you and I both know, for some people that's really scary. They think this thing is supposed to get codified in the right words, and then it's done forever. Yeah. But that's not working for a lot of us. And we're seeing it in a different way. Yeah. Talk about that.

Tripp: I think part of the reason it's a difficult conversation to ask about, "Oh, what's the essence of Christianity?" Or "What is real Christianity?" The moment you ask to define a tradition, and this is true in the same way about what does it mean to be America or a democracy, once you ask to define a tradition, you end up in this circular justification, where you look back to the origin of the tradition and then you look to the present. And when those two keep reinterpreting itself... And you can spot it in different parts of The Church differently, I grew up a Baptist preachers kid. So we used biblical Christianity. That's the origin. And then all the weird conclusions that only people in the 17th century and later had, happened to agree with the origin biblical Christianity. And then your Catholic friends are no like, "No, no, no, no. Let's talk about Orthodox Christianity and the ecumenical councils."

Tripp: And then they guide us to reading scripture and you all got really frisky a Baptist. There's always others use for historic Christianity or credal Christianity or whatever it is. I think that the reason traditions have a hard time deciding what their essence is, is because they're still alive. Like a living tradition has all the problems that anything alive has. Every, every generation, it inherits something. And then it decides what's it's inheriting. What are the parts of it that are problematic, what are the questions of it that still ring, what are the symbols of it that are still alive. But then there are other responses in the past that are ugly. Just think of in America, how The Church has responded around all the racial questions. There used to be a time that being the "Biblical Christian" in America meant you defended slavery in the right of slave owners.

Tripp: Because if God was so against it, then why didn't anyone speak out? And they can insert all the Bible verses. And now we're at a point where if you said something out loud, "I'm trying to be a biblical Christian and I support child slavery." Everyone looks at you and goes, "You're wrong." And I say that because there's this tension of the origin and the present. And how you justify it covers up all sorts of ideologies. And we can look at it in the past and go "That happens." But what happens when it's in the present? What are the ideologies that generations in the future will look back and see, "Did you hear that conversation to Brian and Tripp? Brian wrote that book Do I stay Christian?" You read the whole thing. There's tons of beautiful parts in it, but insert things we're blind to, right now, can you believe they didn't even notice?

Tripp: And just imagine what our grandkids are going to say when they look back at our consumption patterns in light of the ecological crisis. I already get those questions from my son, who's growing weary. I say that because what we see in the gospel there, in Peter's encounter, the recognition that to give oneself to Christ, to be a follower of Jesus, a disciple of Jesus, involves an existential orientation that you're giving yourself to this community and following this rabbi. But you don't know what it means. And throughout the new Testament, the disciples, and especially in the synoptic gospels, get the language right all the time. That's why they're disciples, "You're the Christ son of the living God." And then once the content starts to get filled in, Jesus consistently looks at him and goes "WTF? What do I have to do?" Peter gets this, "Oh, God revealed it to you. My father told you about who I am."

Tripp: And then the moment they're on the Mount of transfiguration and Elijah, Moses,

roll up and he's like, "Let's build booth. Let's stay here." And Jesus goes, "No, we're going to Jerusalem." Pete's like, "Whoa. Jesus, you know they want to kill you. Right?" And you get the, "Get behind me, Satan." Now it's not at that point he missed the theological question like, "Oh, who is the origin of the Christian tradition?" Jesus. Or that Jesus is Lord, or is disciple. It's the content of it. And the content of it to understand the way his vision of divine and beauty and love and justice, had to disentangle it from God's, it involved being with Jesus all the way to the cross. I think that one of the gifts that is just sitting there in the image of Jesus, James and John, have it differently in the gospels on the question of power, is that the gospels go, "Even the people that Jesus chose and trusted, get the content wrong and they discover it in being a community of practice in the way and love of Jesus."

Tripp: And I think that a lot of times, because of modernity, because of the way we justified ourselves in Christendom was to assert some authority, be it the Bible or the tradition or whatever else, because our real goal is to have the content that then we can retweet, say that that's final. And now our anxiety's gone about truth and existence. We recognize that those kinds of faith they're ugly and not life giving. But we still have this allergy to leaving beyond that certainty and that finality about the truth. And I think when we recognize especially religious truth is not some objective statement, but a subjective engagement, being a disciple.

Tripp: Then it opens us up to both be passionately committed, recognizing that whatever beautiful articulation and embodiment we do in the present, part of it being committed to what's to come, is that it will be deconstructed. It will be fallible. It will include things later, the Spirit will wean out. And the new Testament's full of it, like we're Gentiles. If they were good, biblical Christians, Peter would've won. And we would've had to get snip to join team Jesus. And it wasn't that he found a Bible verse to justify eating across that line. It was the activity of the spirit of God that then demanded from Peter, a new interpretation of the faith received. Jesus said, "Don't change the vow marks on Torah." And then the holy ghost was like, "Well..."

Brian: I think a lot of us have gotten comfortable with the idea that people called it progressive revelation, that they didn't have it all figured out in such and such a year, but that we continue to learn and grow. But I think you might say part of what they got with progressive revelation, they got the idea that it's cumulative. In other words, we keep getting it better and better and better and better. But I think part of what you're saying is more radical than that. It's saying that in a sense, we always have to have a beginner's mind. It's not that instead of our options being narrowed as we go along, because now we've got... It's like legal precedents. We've got lawyers and Supreme court decisions that have been reducing our options as we go along. You're saying the very nature of truth and the very nature of an encounter with the divine is that we're always in the beginner's mind, so to speak. And those virtues of humility and curiosity are perpetually important. Am I reading you right there?

Tripp: Yeah. I think the cumulative language is important, If the primary virtue of your religious tradition is truth and things change, then it's cumulative. But let's imagine that at the very heart of it is love. Love is not something that's cumulative, it's contextual. What love looks like, perfect love in one moment, even with the same person looks different. You and I been friends for a long time, there are different times we have been friends to each other in different ways. We've shared about being parents. What loving our kids well looks really different when they're two months old and you have to change your diaper. If they were 22

and we're like, "Look, I love you. Let me help you out." And it's a joke there, but I think underneath it is that we haven't taken seriously, that the crescendo of the new Testament is, God is love. That Paul is like "The greatest of these is love."

Tripp: Then when we tell the Jesus story and we give the invitation to be part of the body of Christ, that's because we recognize that we can so easily cloud the lens of love. So that all of a sudden the image, the ideal looks like us. Jesus is there to deconstruct the ways we project ourselves onto the divine and then go, "Oh, I'm just doing the loving thing." But it does involve a transition, I think from seeing the truth as something that's cumulative, where you're building and figuring out things, and then finding the place where it crescendos, usually corresponding to you. [Hael 00:22:33] did it, but also depending on your denomination, there's someone that has.

Brian: Yes.

Tripp: But love is not about a cumulative thing. It's about a contextual thing. And because it's nested in relationships for me, like a process relational view insists that some of our errors in the Christian tradition have been because we really desired to have a finality in things that God has desired to have relationality at the heart of. And it was seeing it in the life of Jesus and in the disciples and things that to me is where I made the connection first to process thinking and realize that we had these ideas about what perfection and God and stuff looked like. And then if you just were me a Baptist preacher's kid that read the Bible all the time, you're like, "What?" But in the scriptures it says... You come up with these contexts.

Brian: You started by saying that the way that the Christian religion, and this would be true of other communities too, but we use the Bible and even Christian history to justify where we are. In other words, we're very susceptible to just using our past to justify where we are. And then we even do that as individuals, individuals, we read everything. This is relevant to this podcast because the first two seasons, we talked about biases. In a sense, we look at everything in the past with the bias of confirming what we already think and confirming how we already do things. But this different approach says, "No, the goal is not to justify where we are. The goal is to see our current context and then ask what's the most loving way we can be in the world and respond to this context."

Brian: And that always involves seeing the world in a way that the world is changing, it's in process. A lot of people, I'm going to guess, who are eaves dropping on this conversation, they've never heard the term process philosophy, process theology. I think that if we could help them understand this way of looking at the world as a world in process, it could help them look at Christianity in a different way. I wonder if you could maybe give us a little introduction. If you want, you could mention people like Alfred North Whitehead and John Cobb and others, or you don't even have to. But how would you help people see there's this common way of looking at the world that doesn't involve seeing the world in process versus a way that does?

Tripp: I'll tell it autobiographically. For me, the big question that blew up the inherited structures of my faith in college were three different things. And they all sent me running in some sense to finding a viable response. One was after 9/11, the religious response was so ugly. You had the biggest protest in the world at that time. Was against the invasion in Iraq. All

the leaders of the major governments that are leading the invasion are people of faith who actually attend regularly their congregation. And a world protesting against who are baptized into the body of the one that said, "Turn the other cheek, pray for your enemies," lead it. And after that, the Islamophobia and that stuff after it, was just gross. Throw in within, we learn about torture and lying to get us into war. You take that my personal experience with evil and suffering with loved ones that all had multiple family members get cancer, and some die cancer relatively quickly as I was a minister for the first time and got the emergency calls where you show up in the hospital room.

Tripp: And so many of the things I learned as a good Calvinist sounded like the least Jesusy answers. Like "This is the will of God" or the cheesy pious ones. And the other big issue was, I was a nerd. I was really into science and philosophy, and I wanted answers that were reasonable and made sense with the best we know in the world. So I'm sitting there as a student wrestling with those different visions and I had a professor in a religion class assign us Thomas Aquinas. Big guy, the theologian in the Catholic Church, Aristotelian, philosophically, and I'm reading his book and I'm just like, "This seems wrong. Have you read in the Bible God changes God's mind. God grieves and suffers, has joy?"

Tripp: And Aquinas is like, "It sounds like that, but not really because divine perfection means God doesn't change. God has all the power and this kind of thing." I was conflicted there and I raised the question. My professor's like "Tripp, that's process philosophy. It's not compatible with Christianity." And I did what any angst filled 19 year old does, they go to the library, if you're a nerd. Just to realize what this prohibited thing was. And I get to the library, I check out some books. I go home, read all weekend, ready to go in armed for bear. Because nothing sounds more fun than arguing in philosophy class, if you are in any agreement with and know the other person's wrong. Now you just got to figure out why. And so that weekend I'm reading through Charles Hartshorne Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes and then read Process in Reality, a book, I still understand, but the very end of it, there's this book that wrote it.

Tripp: He was an atheist and came back into believing in something like God, because of the changes in science at the turn of the century, kind of relativity, quantum physics, our ongoing understanding of evolution. There's a lot of reasons and people are interested, they could just search on my website and they'll find plenty. But he came back into believing in God, but the vision of God was really distinct for him than the dominant visions. And at the end of the book, he gives us poetic flourish about it. Now, when I read that, I said to myself, "I think he's right, because there are Christians who are thinking they're being faithful by attacking and demonizing another religion, lying to go invade and ignoring the calls across the world for a peaceful resolution. Or maybe even just an equitable response to a terrorist attack." Then I'm thinking of sitting there watching someone suffer and go, "You cannot tell me God's at least as nice and loving as Jesus, and thanks it's in God's divine will to torture my grandmother, to have parents lose a child in a car wreck."

Tripp: And are like, all those kinds of things, I'm like, "This makes no sense." And then I'm sitting there in class being told, "Well, I know the Bible says this, but if you understand real philosophy, then this is not true. God's really impotent," or "God's really all these kind of things." And so Whitehead's picture there is to go, "What if the image of God isn't..." And if you read the whole passage, it goes, "What if it's not God is the giant moral law giver? Or

God's not the giant judge of all things, or God's not the perfect being principle? What if the divine is much more like what you see in Jesus?" And when I thought of that as someone that... I Was a sword reel champ, Brian. I used to be able to quote the Bible to humiliate people on behalf of invitations to God.

Tripp: And when you start running through scriptures, you realize that there is an ongoing battle about who God is in. It is God really the king, the ruler? Is God really first the judge and law giver? Is God really the principle of all things? And what does it look like? And in the Hebrew scriptures, one of the other images is what? God is parent, and God is lover. And in Jesus, when you learn to pray, you pray abba. And you're baptized into what? A kingdom. But who is king? Abba. And when Abba is judge we're being adopted into the divine family. It's not like our trial for murder. And when Abba is king, you find that all of us image bearers inherit the divine life. To me, that passage sparked off what if what Jesus said, did, endured, actually revealed the heartbeat of the divine?

Tripp: Then how would we have to look back and go, "Did Caesar conquer our vision of God and then tell us what this story really meant? Was the one that builds crosses and that not that the divine is much more like the one that bears crosses, suffers with us, offers hope out of injustice and that kind of thing."

Brian: And obviously the ramifications of that are incredibly far reaching and incredibly relevant to our world today.

Brian: It comes back to this idea of confirmation bias, that we have an image of a dictatorial, dominating ruler who protects us and threatens them. And so that becomes our image of God. But we sync them up somehow and then to say, "No, actually what was at the heart of Jesus and the original Christian message and the germ of this whole thing, was to challenge that and to think of God in different ways." And this is such a tendency, isn't it? To take a metaphor and absolutize it to make that metaphor be literal, no longer a metaphor, but literal. There's this need to back away from that and let things move again, let us see that our understanding of God and life and why we're here and all the rest to be put into motion.

Brian: And this makes sense of why over these last 14 years, you've been having conversations with the greatest living theologians and philosophers to have conversations to open up possibilities for us to move forward in different ways. And those of us who identify as Christian, whether Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, whatever, for us to say, "Hey, this thing isn't hardened cement," that it can have a different future than its present and past, and that there are new possibilities opening up. Let me make this a little bit personal. I'm just thinking, you've been doing this for 14 years, having these conversations, how has it affected you in your own inner life and development? Talk to me about that. Because I'd venture to say there's not a single person on earth who's had as many deep conversations with as many frontline theologians as you've had.

Tripp: At this point, I have like over 1300 episodes between all the different podcasts. And we do these classes like you and I did, and some of them are with one other scholar that's a specialist like in Kierkegaard, or Bonhoeffer, or James Cone. And those are like super deep, not even just conversations, but with a specialist and we're reading their texts. There are two things that come to mind about having done it, like macro observations. One is most of the

intellectual reasons people give for not believing in God or that kind of stuff, there are really, really good answers to them, if that's the reason that keeps you. And there are multiple good answers that can cohere deeply with contemporary science, that can respond to the questions around pluralism in all sorts of different ways, address questions of violence.

Tripp: There are really beautiful, faithful responses and there's a multiplicity of them. Out of that, I have started to see the faith as less like getting to the most beautiful, final, good answer. But my job is cultivating an ecosystem of beautiful answers and trying to feature beautiful representatives from different traditions. I am as far as it gets from being a reformed thinker. But I interview quite a few of them and I'm like, "If you're going to be one, then..." If you met my friend Oliver Crisp, he's a Calvinist and he is Evangelical. And I would never go there, but if I'm going to, he gives us beautiful account. He actually wrestles with the questions that made me leave it behind. And one of my favorite thinkers was in the book that you read earlier, Joseph Bracken, he's a Jesuit, but so is Roger Hate, who's a Jesuit.

Tripp: And they have very different visions of the faith, the task for the theologian, how you understand Christ and relationship to a pluralistic context. And yet both of their answers are beautiful in life giving. The big picture for me is that there's not like a lack of intellectual resources in The Church to address these. I feel like they get stuck up in the academy, and then if you just think of what ministers are dealing with at this point, they have to do way more with way less, because of the changes in The Church. It's hard to find the resources and connect people and such. There's that side. The other big takeaway from having done it this long is, faith looks really, really different depending on the kind of questions you carry. Any scholar, you have to do the things the academy does.

Tripp: If people read Divine Self Investment, unlike the first Jesus' book, which is much more personal, you don't know all my stories that are animating it, but they're real specific ones. But there's a whole thing you do in the academy. But the more I've gotten to know scholars who have wrestled with some particular thing, so often it comes from the fact that they had a big question. They either energized them, or perplexed them, or it was connected to pain and harm and struggle, and they refuse to drop the question. And so they're going to pursue it. And I find that to be real exhilarating, because a lot of people today have questions and challenges, and then they don't end up with communities and traditions that help them think about it in wise ways. And I think one of the gifts of a religious tradition, and for me Christianity, is that it is a wisdom tradition that has been thinking with stories and symbols and signs and rituals and practices about what it means to be human, and what it means to move towards goodness and justice and beauty, and that kind of thing.

Tripp: And so often when you have big questions, but you don't have the stories, narrative, and tribe to wrestle with it, then it's easy for your soul to get battered down and to feel isolated and alone. And getting to encounter so many gifted scholars of the tradition that I'm a part of, and then... If you listen, there are plenty of times people from other traditions or philosophers that don't have religious commitments or scientists and stuff. But I have started to have deep resonance with people that take the questions that humans ask seriously.

Tripp: I started having to identify with them deeply and think it is too easy in our culture to set aside questions that demand wrestling and attention, and then move on to simulating having deep values and commitments. And a religious tradition, not just Christianity, are

communities that have that wisdom. And they've survived and thrived because they intuit in all the things that they're doing, ways of living a more full life. In some way, I feel like I hit the lottery to start a theology podcast early enough that it's got to stick around, and you get to hear what is it like for brilliant people to take a tradition seriously, questions seriously, and the best knowledge we have seriously. And then what does it sound like when they wrestle and are honest?

Brian: Well, as you were explaining that, Tripp, I kept thinking that when I try to teach about the contemplative of mind, one of the things that I'm struggling to try to help people see and grapple with, is something that was implicit in everything you just said. And let me see if I can articulate it. A lot of us grew up with the idea that our religion was supposed to give us all the right answers to show how everybody else is wrong, we've got the truth contained in our systematic theology and so on. And when we become disillusioned with that, when some of our answers stop working, like for you after September 11th, or in the face of deep human suffering or grappling with philosophical questions where the answers were not satisfactory, what we do then is we throw out that old set of answers and we try to find the new set of answers that we can be equally certain about.

Brian: But what you described is coming to a different place where you're able to see... How did you say it? Like a whole repertoire of answers. Like here's a whole bunch of beautiful answers to these questions, and it's not like I've seized on this is the only right one, but I'm living with some sense of, this is a really important question. And here's a bunch of ways that people are grappling with it. And I'm glad to have a whole bunch of them, and I'm not seizing on one to vanquish all the others. That to me is a way of holding, knowing and unknowing together. Does that make sense?

Tripp: Yeah. Two things pop to mind when you say that. One is, any declarative account of something is equally revelatory as it is hiding. Anytime we give an account of something, part of what it does is what it conceals and what it reveals. And recognizing that that's what happens in symbolic communication, I think means we have a different task when it comes to talking about something that's even more mysterious than self understanding or an account of your best friend or love or partner. Human beings, we're not clear to who we are as ourselves. And yet we relate to ourselves to have to figure it out. Alicia, and I've been married almost 20 years now and I still choose a mystery. And so part of recognizing this kind of shift in how you view accounts of anything, be it a person, or a tradition, or the truth, or God, or Jesus or anything, is realizing that each of them reveals something, it's putting something forward, but it also conceals something.

Tripp: And when we look back at our history, we can notice times. When I spend a lot of time reading Luther, when I did my qualifying exam on him and I read way more than I'll probably ever read again. But one of the things I came to recognize was that in his context, in his situation, what was being concealed in the life of his parishioners was that the God that made them, and knows them completely, loves them completely. And they were anxious wondering whether they were the beloved of God. And out of that, you get the early Martin Luther in this fire, that's both criticizing the tradition and offering this picture of grace. Now, are there things that were concealed in his insistence on this? Yes. Antisemitism being one of them. His inability to recognize in the peasant wars what was going on in the present.

- Tripp: But also that tradition itself realized that there were things that were concealed in it. Luther for a long time said that God was so mysterious we don't know what's on the divine backside. We know that God of love has reached out, but what is in the mystery of God? He says, [foreign language 00:43:04], the mystery of God. And he would go, "We can't know." Now, Lutheran tradition later realized, "Now we're creating a whole nother context where people then want to know whether they are known and loved completely by God." And what happens? You have a number of different parts of the Lutheran tradition recognize something. What is the mystery of God? The mystery of God is the infinite God of love. And so God remains a mystery, but it's a mystery that coheres with the one who's identified with us, is always before us and for us. Then you have to go like, "Then what happens with that?"
- Tripp: It gets received again by liberation theologians in the Lutheran tradition. And then wants to insist what? That the individuals are bearing the divine image, are always in the context of infinite love, but what love looks like worked out in material reality is not always affirmation and blessing when your material existence is entangled in violence and oppression. That's just one idea. And each time, when you look at the context, I want to look back and go, "Hell yeah, Luther, if you meet someone that's anxious that wants to know whether the God revealed in Christ knows and loves them, then you update that theology." And then you want to go like, "You're wondering whether the mystery of God's against you? Thank you for updating how that doctrine works, because it concealed things that were ugly." And then Westerners in dominant context are proclaiming the universal love of God.
- Tripp: And then people in that same tradition who are economically exploited by the west go, "Hey, have we thought about contextualizing this a bit?" And then we learn again. And so that activity, so often, if we see the tradition just as cumulative getting to perfection, then we miss the point. If we see it that in each context, what is being demanded from us, that we can muster in our lips and in our living, then that's what theology's up to. And I could pick a different tradition because I'm not even Lutheran, but I fell in love with Luther, Anselm, and penal substitutionary atonement and that whole story. There are beautiful things through the whole thing, and I would not be interested in any of it at this point.
- Tripp: I feel like when you get to know the context in these figures and leaders through The Church, in the communities they were serving, what seems like an ugly thing to repeat today, could be heard as beautiful truth in that moment. And that means we can relate to it differently. It doesn't mean I want anyone to sound like they're from Geneva today. And that was a Calvin joke for those that don't know that. But that's different than going, "Calvin was a brilliant reformer who revealed things that in his time and context were liberating in life giving." And it also concealed things at another context, say South Africa in apartheid, concealed the way the same notion of spheres of influence and sovereignty gets worked out.
- Brian: Beautiful. Beautiful. Well, I'll tell you that is, I think, a very fitting place to draw this conversation to a close, because it reminds me of a little saying that dawned on me, I think back when I was in graduate school. And here it is, "Today's solutions create tomorrow's problems, and then tomorrow's problems invite new solutions, which will create the next day's problems." And in that sense, Anselm, or Luther, or Aquinas, or Calvin, we can look back and say "They were trying to solve a problem in their day, and they did their best to solve it in a beautiful way." And then that ended up creating new problems in another

context, which meant that the faith needed to keep growing. I think if people can receive that as a gift that the Christian faith is not a set of answers and solutions, it's a bunch of problem solving that keeps opening up new contexts, which then leaves us with a question that we won't answer, but maybe we'll leave as a gift to everyone.

Brian: And that is "What are the problems we're trying to solve today and how are our solutions going to be problems for future generations? And how does that change the way that we hold our identity as Christians and our faith as Christians?" Does that ring true in any final thoughts on that, Tripp?

Tripp: Yeah, honestly, that's one of the reasons I really love your new book, *Do I Stay Christian?* Is because it recognizes there are really good reasons to leave, and there are some really exciting invitations if you stay. And I think that a lot of people, because of the rather narrow authoritarian context they experience faith, that then when they have these stirrings on behalf of justice or inclusion or advocacy and things like that, or intellectual ones around engaging, say other religious traditions or the scientists or stuff. They have all these things animating and energizing them. And then they're told by the toxic system they're in, "That puts you outside our tent. And it also means you should leave the community of Jesus followers." I think that there are plenty of people who experience that uncomfortability and frustration and anger and animation to their faith, that they could be allies with the Holy Spirit in their context.

Tripp: And that one of the greatest gifts The Church gets are people who refuse to leave when they got really good reasons, because they're staying on behalf of where we'll be in the next generation, and the next generation. And it's so many of the people I've connected with recently that I'm like, "You got to get Brian's new book when it comes out," are ones who have really good reasons to leave. And the reason they're leaving is a passion that so connects to my experience with the divine and with Christ that I'm like, "Oh, I want there to be space for you. I want to be invested in whatever ways I can in making The Church make space for people that are so committed to something so beautiful and true from my perspective that we need those voices."

Tripp: And sometimes that tension and the pushback you get in a religious context is really the affirmation that you're listening, and that call, for process people, at every moment, God comes to the moment and there's allures, the fun word, but what is available to you at any moment, it's not everything, it's whatever you can do in that moment.

Tripp: And you're receiving the past and it shapes what's possible, but all the possibilities, some are better and worse than others. Some are more beautiful and justice field. And I think one of the gifts of the process vision for this moment is you're only responsible for what you can actually contribute in the next moment. You don't have to fix all the huge issues and understand all the big problems in each moment you're invited to say and do and cooperate and participate with the invitations of love that are there.

Tripp: And when we do that, then the next moment it increases the potential, because we've sown seeds of response to the divine lure of love. I find that to help me stay patient in situations where I ask the same questions you're asking in the book, because if sometimes I feel responsible for things I can't do anything to. I'm not responsible for the whole church, but

I feel like it's sometimes. I'm not responsible for American democracy, but I feel like it's sometimes. And one of the gifts of a process vision is to go like, "What are you responsible to?" And then, "What are you responsible for?"

Tripp: You're responsible to all the communities and peoples and relations that you're related to. But you're responsible for your own agency. And so you ask yourself in that agency, "How can I cooperate with the divine?" And that helps me stay centered and investing in places with my relational energy, where I think I'm contributing to something beautiful.

Brian: Thanks for listening to this episode. I'd like to leave you with this short passage from my book, *Do I Stay Christian?*

Brian: "Most of us woke up this morning in a universe that was not at its best at the beginning. Nor is it at its best now. It is on route, becoming, in process. Always presented with a possibility of evolving into something more beautiful, diverse, alive, and conscious, or stagnating and decaying toward extinction. We do not know what the universe can become given enough time and enough opportunity aided by our own faith, hope, courage, and love. If the Christian faith is to have a creative and constructive future, it will have to undergo its own metamorphosis."

Brian: I want to offer a special thanks to Tripp Fuller for being our guest and conversation partner in today's episode. I would like to thank the staff, faculty, and board of the Center for Action and Contemplation for all they do to help spread skills we need to be more just and compassionate human beings. And a special thanks to Corey Pigg, the producer of this program, who is such a joy to work with. And thanks to you for listening and for sharing this podcast with others.