

# RENEWING FAITH IN A TIME OF FRAGMENTATION

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*Is it necessary—or even possible—  
to find a renewed and renewing faith?*

In January of 2025, more than one hundred people gathered from around the world online to explore the idea of “Renewing Faith,” in a conference hosted by Process & Faith, a program of the Center for Process Studies. We spent two full days not just in conversation but also engaged visual art, music, and embodied movement. It was a rich and inspiring experience.

What do we mean when we use the phrase “renewing faith”? When it comes to language for programs or events, I love using gerunds—those words that end in -ing—because they have a double meaning. Therefore, when I use the term “renewing faith,” I’m thinking both of a type of faith that is renewing us individually in our spiritual lives, and also about the ideas and practices that might be renewing of the whole experience of faith itself.

We might ask if such an endeavor is even needed. Isn’t modern culture too secular, long over the kind of Christian faith around which people used to center their lives? Many of us have seen sobering statistics about the huge shift away from religious identification and attendance at worship. In fact, it seems the decline in worship attendance was put in overdrive by Covid.

We’ve also heard about the religious “nones” and the “spiritual but not religious.” Some of us may have even begun to think of ourselves in

those terms. But I think people are hungrier for the Sacred now than they ever were.

I believe even Christians are hungry for a renewal of faith. Even in their 1976 text, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin argued that Christian faith can only come alive when we can express a contemporary vision of the world that is, at the same time, “truly Christian.” They write, “We are not so much concerned that the forms and language of the past be preserved as that the faith come fully to life in relation to our needs and opportunities.” This seems to me to perfectly characterize the approach we felt it was important to take in the “Renewing Faith” conference.

In my doctoral research at the Claremont School of Theology, I examined the issue of fragmentation in American culture and in Western culture more broadly. When I look around, I see that we are a fragmented people at all levels—societally, interpersonally, and intrapersonally (within ourselves). We see evidence of this fragmentation in our politics, in our loneliness, and in the way that early life trauma has been shown to affect our physical and mental health.

We are not whole, and we don’t typically see ourselves as in relationship to a whole-making and sacred cosmos. I place much of the blame for that on the shoulders of the fragmenting worldview in which we’re swimming in American culture. The story we tell ourselves about the world is dualistic, mechanistic, materialistic, and dismissive of anything we decide is nonrational.

But everything we love about life—love, art, beauty, meaning, purpose, dreams and transcendent experience—is nonrational. It’s not only that the story we tell ourselves about the world is unsatisfying. Equally unsatisfying is the story we’ve long heard about God and God’s relationship with the world that just seems to fall flatter every year.

My friend David Tacey, a scholar in Australia, has a wonderful book called *The Postsecular Sacred*. In it he talks about a three-fold pattern that he sees in Western societies and individuals. That pattern begins with religious consciousness—where the faith of our families and communities is just accepted by us and believed in without much question.

Secularism is the second part of the pattern where there's a search for knowledge that is driven by logic and the intellect. M. Scott Peck wrote about this as the "Skeptic-Individual" stage of spiritual development in his book *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*. Here we question everything and critically evaluate our religious systems, often resulting in a process of "deconstruction" of our faith beliefs, and even outright atheism.

What I find most interesting is that Tacey talks about atheism as a paradoxically crucial and necessary step in the recovery of God. That's because many people find that the assumptions of postmodernity and its tendency to smash belief systems ultimately don't satisfy our seeking minds and searching hearts. We are restless in our spirits and searching for meaning.

Peck wrote about the stage after the skeptical as being a mystical and communal understanding that is marked by a heart-based search for knowledge. In this stage, he said, we return to the myths and stories of our formation and see them in a whole new light.

For Tacey, the third part of the pattern he sees is what he calls the "post-secular sacred." That term is not a reactionary call for the revival of dogmatic orthodoxies. Instead, it's a progressive term calling for the renewal of the religious enterprise from the resources of contemporary theology, science, and philosophy.

Those of us who have come together in this book (and in the conference that birthed it) to explore the core themes of Christianity from process and open & relational perspectives, have experienced that renewal within our own lives.

When we start to think with philosophers like Alfred North Whitehead, or theologians like John Cobb, Monica Coleman, and Thomas Jay Oord, or eco-feminist theologians like Sallie McFague and Rosemary Radford Ruether, or evolutionary thinkers like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Ilia Delio, our faith may come alive again and speak not just to our minds, but to our hearts. It may speak in words and spark feelings that can live in harmony with our experience of God and the world.

I agree with Tacey when he tells us that we are living in a very different spiritual landscape than in the past. In *The Postsecular Sacred*, he writes that "Religion has morphed into something other than what it was; heaven is

not a place in the sky but a metaphor for a transcendence found in creation, God is not a magisterial being out there but the incarnational spirit of the world, the cosmology of religion has been deconstructed, and a mystical vision of the closeness of the sacred has replaced the distant divinity of the past.”

Above, I wrote of fragmentation—that we are divided people living in a divisive culture that pulls us apart at every turn. But when I began to dive deep into process-relational theology and Jungian psychology, I found thinkers that described reality at the levels of both cosmos and human psyche as being integrating not fragmenting. I found an understanding that both cosmos and psyche at their core are marked by value, by relationality, and by transformation. I’ve found through a spiritual practice of dream work that we can experience that reality for ourselves in a way that shows us that we matter, we belong, and we can experience positive change. (I wrote about this in *A Process Spirituality: Christian and Transreligious Resources for Transformation*)

I’ve seen this to be true in my own life. Early on, I accepted the teachings of the church. But then I was exposed to modern science, to Eastern philosophies, and research into consciousness. I studied theology and read *Bible Archeology* magazine. I fell in love with the medieval mystics and came alive when I read *Women Who Run with the Wolves* by Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes. I began working with my dreams in a spiritual way and discovered God at work in the depths of my being.

I know that it’s possible to not just embrace a better worldview, but to experience the reality of that view at the heart of my own life. I know I’ve been renewed and my faith has been renewed. And I hear stories from other people in this community who have also been changed by what they’ve discovered when they were willing to question and willing to be renewed.

Many of those people are here in this book, ready to share the ways in which they’ve brought renewing ideas about faith to life in their own lives and in congregations and communities. They, too, have found that when we can approach the old themes in fresh ways, our lives and communities can be renewed and made more whole.

And that's critically important, because it's not enough to be changed as an individual, we want to become those vitalizing people that Joseph Campbell spoke of in *The Power of Myth* who vitalize and transform the world around us too. This lonely, angry, and despairing world needs us today. It's crying out for renewal. Through the writings presented in this book, I hope we can begin a conversation about the ways in which we might be renewed to become renewing influences.

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*What experiences have you had, or resources have you explored, that sparked a renewal of your own faith?*

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