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The growing numbers of folk who now check the “None of the above” box when it comes to religion may wish to skip the following column and move directly to the car ads but for those others who find the dramatic deconstruction of many things religious and the subsequent reshaping of the very future of all of humankind of more than passing interest, read on.

This past week Pope Benedict XVI, known to his friends as Joe Ratzinger and to his enemies as “The Enforcer”, surprised most of the Christian world by extending an invitation to the historically heretical but currently conflicted conservative members of the world-wide Anglican Communion to jump their teetering ship and make sail on the Vatican’s ecclesiastical vessel.

Like many denominations, the Anglicans (Episcopalians here in the U.S.) are immersed in a struggle for their religious identity that pits those who wish for a religion that integrates the scientific, cultural and philosophical progress of the past 600 years or so with those who prefer Pope Benedict’s predilection for the Dark Ages. Hence the invitation.

Benedict, who was the head of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly known as The Inquisition, before he was picked by his peers for the top spot, has long expressed his dissatisfaction for the way the world has gone. His continued support of the failed policy of sexual abstinence in the fight against AIDS and over-population combined with his shocking reversal of the excommunication of an unrepentant Holocaust-denying bishop are only two examples of the Pope’s failure to understand how life has changed since the Roman Emperor Constantine swung his sword and switched our predecessors from pagans into pious Christians.

So his invitation to the disaffected Anglicans appears to be nothing more than a political attempt to shore up the medieval mindset that pervades this disappointed part of Christianity. It is not entirely unlike the current fundamentalists’ power grab among the Moslems or Jews or Hindus to name a few obvious examples. Religious right-wingers watch with horror as the modern world takes more and more of their adherents away. Their common strategy seems to be entrenchment, drawing that proverbial line in the sand that declares whether one is on the side of God or the sinful world. And once the divine blessing is established, it becomes increasingly easy to resort to the most un-Christian or un-Islamic or un-Jewish of actions.

At this point it would be easy and tempting to throw up one’s hands and declare all religion anathema as comedian Bill Maher and scientist Richard Dawkins have so publically done. Their declarations of the irrelevancy and even villainy of religion fails to understand the monumental shift that is occurring among religions today. What we are witnessing everywhere from the intransience of the Vatican to the violence of the Taliban are the last throes of the dying. Religion that shapes itself on a pre-scientific, anti-modern worldview, no matter how powerful it may appear right now to be, is condemned to the dustbin of history along with flat-earthers, creationists and the Mayan calendar.

Conversely, and despite the depositions of Maher, Dawkins, et.al, a new kind of religion is being born and taking form in a myriad of differing shapes. It is religion unafraid of the progress

that has transpired across the spectrum of science, a religion that isn't informed by an omnipotent being or infallible book but by the actions of communities of compassionate people who are experiencing the transcendent power of peace-making and justice-seeking. This is religion that finds its identity not in doctrinal declarations that distance itself from others but the realization that our planet grows ever smaller and ever desperate for a unifying theology that recognizes the failures of separatist superiorities and the ultimate value of acknowledging that there are many, equally valid and honorable, paths to the truth.

As idealistic and unrealistic as this may appear, the fact is it is occurring over and over again all over the world in mostly un-dramatic and under-reported ways but occurring it is and it is slowly but inevitably eroding the fortress walls of the medieval-thinking men now in power.