

Essential Christianity

Frank Parkinson

Labels can be very misleading, and the same word can often refer to quite different realities. “Christianity” is just such an ambiguous label, being applied to three main types of religion which are in opposition to each other. In talking about “essential Christianity”, therefore, one must tread very carefully. To avoid confusion I will refer to the three types of Christianity as primitive, mystical and Nicene. Primitive Christianity is that form which was promoted for the first ten years or so after the death of Jesus, and mostly by people who had known him. Mystical Christianity was first taught by Paul, but has been overshadowed by the Christian mythology, which he also introduced and which was to develop into Nicene Christianity. Nicene Christianity is, of course, that form by which orthodoxy is defined. One is recognized as a Christian if one declares belief in its articles, and especially that Jesus is the second person of a divine trinity, born of a virgin, and that he rose physically from the dead. It is this belief system that gives Christians their deepest identity, and any change to it is likely to have the most traumatic consequences.

I would take essential Christianity to be the second, mystical form, and that it is defined by what Paul called “having the mind that was in Christ.” Karl Rahner is often quoted as saying that the Christianity of the future will be mystical or it will not exist, and I hope this paper will be a step in that direction. The greatest difficulty facing the Church is that having the mind of Christ is in contradiction with Nicene Christianity, for the obvious reason that Jesus, according to the Creed is the only begotten son of God, God in human form, and therefore sinless. We are thus trapped in a Catch 22, more than one, in fact, for it would be arrogant to the point of blasphemy to seek such a unique state.

The first obstacle is knowing what is “the mind of Christ”, or Christ-consciousness, and once we let go of the mythic Jesus – the so-called “Jesus of faith” - and use logic and history to get answers, we find ourselves in a maze of speculation, with very little fact to guide us. I think anyone who has tried to follow the scholarship about the historical Jesus over the past fifty years is tempted to throw up their hands and cry, a plague on all your theories. Nevertheless, there are some vital clues to help, such as the fact that Jesus was a Jew, and that he saw himself as a reformer of Judaism, not as founding a new religion called Christianity. In Matthew’s gospel we are told that he “sent out the twelve with the following instructions: ‘Do not take the road to gentile lands, and do not enter any Samaritan town, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (10:5).

The word “Christian” was not used by him, but was almost certainly coined by Paul, for much the same kind of reason that Tony Blair invented the term “New Labour” as a kind of Trojan horse to introduce principles that went against those of old Labour. In the case of Paul, he wanted to spread Christ-consciousness throughout the world, while rejecting the tribal mindset of the original Jesus movement. He had a new religion to preach, which was, he said, in

Galatians, “not taken over from anyone but given through a personal revelation by Jesus”(1:11). If that were not provocative enough, he calls the orthodox Jesus movement “the party of the circumcision” and ridicules them as “the snippers” and says that those who followed a religion of the Law were “under a curse”. No wonder that the Jews later tried to assassinate him for destroying their religion – which was, it must be said, the religion of Jesus.

Paul’s problem was that in preaching a religion the purpose of which was attaining Christ-consciousness, he was talking to a pagan world about an obscure Jew and convicted felon, an opponent of Roman rule, with as much spiritual authority as an Al Qaeda terrorist would have today. Paul made contact with his non-Jewish hearers by packaging his message about Jesus in categories which they could understand, taken from Greek mythology, where it was quite normal for the Gods on Mount Olympus to have human offspring. The parallel between Jesus, the perfect son of Jahweh and Apollo, the beautiful son of Zeus is too striking to miss.

Today Christianity, which has created Western civilization, is wasting away, whether we measure its decline in falling numbers, closing churches or the feeling that it no longer offers nourishment to the spiritually hungry. Christians Awakening to a New Awareness is a first step towards something new – but what? Awakening is a gradual process and can only happen at the individual’s speed, but if Karl Rahner’s judgement is to be trusted, we must all be moving towards a religion in which we seek the same kind of experience of God as Jesus, essentially that “the Father and I are one.” This habitual sense of oneness with the divine power is the hallmark of mystics in all religions. To get started on the path towards it we must clear away a mountain of historical baggage and misunderstanding, and we shall get little help from the institutional churches, which have a quite different agenda. The Christian ministry on the whole feels that its task is not to unlock our spiritual potential so much as to hand on a deposit of faith.

For this reason, it is inevitable that renewal can only take place at the edge, but the most scary question is whether it can take place at all. Have we come to a historical turning point, the start of a post-Christian era where a new kind of religious community must come into existence if we are to both find spiritual fulfilment and answer to the needs of the world?

This was ultimately the question that faced Paul. Where Jesus saw his mission as putting a new heart into Judaism, Paul realised that Judaism, the noblest religion of ancient times, the religion which had nurtured Jesus, was no longer the answer but part of the problem. Is it too outrageous altogether to say that the Christian churches are now the problem? Are those who cling to a myth-based Nicene Christianity treasuring the peel because they are unable to recognize the fruit? There is a growing awareness that the spiritual need of our time can no longer be answered by traditional Christianity, and that something higher, more demanding, more fulfilling is now called for. In this respect, it is worth quoting from the Spring 2006 Newsletter of the Living Spirituality Network, which asks, “Can the old ways of church life and outreach make any difference? ... Is the evidence mounting that the entire assembly of Christian belief and practice has to be dismantled and reconstructed? ... Are such notions as mission-shaped church, emerging church, new ways of being church actually

shoring up tired structures against a tide of spiritual renewal that they are not going to respond to?”

Abbot John Chapman once advised a correspondent who was having difficulty with silent prayer to pray with words as long as she could, and the same wise advice is surely applicable in relation to those who desire mystical Christianity, but can see no way of letting go of Nicene religion. Hang on as long as you can. Trust that truth will prevail, do not fret or worry, and the time for decision, and strength to make it, will appear in its time.

Paul faced the same challenge that CANA is facing, in that if he was to communicate his sudden realization that God was in the humanity he had created, as well as dwelling in heaven, he would have to turn his deepest religious feeling as a Jew inside out. The uniqueness of Judaism lay, and still lies, in its unbending monotheism and its rejection of religion that worshipped innumerable gods and godlets. The God of the Jews was transcendent, existing somewhere above the world. The God revealed to Paul, however, was immanent, actualised in one member of the human race, Jesus. but potentially in everyone, for he described Jesus as “the first born of a great new human family.”

Many Christians, without doubt the majority, will find it impossible to believe that God is within them, with all that this entails. If accepted, it would seem to be a betrayal of a Christianity that holds Jesus to be the only son of God. To go beyond the Nicene position would not only be an intellectual decision, but a new kind of religious commitment. For many it would demand far more, for it would strike at the very root of their identity as Christians. Not all, by any means, have the psychological strength to go down this path. After all, when the realisation first came to Paul, it brought on an attack of hysterical blindness. To fully accept that one has potentially the same kind of consciousness as Jesus, that one’s truest self is God, is no easy thing. To some it will open up a joyful new existence, but to others it will hardly make sense.

It will call for a painful deconstruction, a step by step withdrawal from the familiar. The most difficult step for many will be to question the truth of the physical resurrection of Jesus, for this is the keystone which holds together the whole structure of mythological Christianity. There has long been impassioned debate about the historical truth of the Resurrection, but the strongest argument for it in practice is that my parents believed in it, and their parents before them, thousands of saints have done so, and almost all the bishops, priests and ministers of the world still believe that it literally happened. An answer cannot be forced, but I will close with two questions that will hopefully stimulate discussion.

The first is: do you believe that the earthly body of Jesus continues to exist in a heaven above the earth (and if you are a Catholic, do you believe his mother’s body is up there too?). The second question is, do you believe in the truth of the gospel accounts of the other resurrections that followed upon that of Jesus, when “many of God’s people arose from sleep, and coming out of their graves after his resurrection they entered the Holy City, where many saw them” (Matt. 27:52). Why believe in one and not the other?

These questions lead to a vitally important extension of Karl Rahner’s vision of the Christianity of the future. It will either be a religion of honesty or it will not exist. The world will not now settle for less.