

## The Spiral of History

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(Excerpted from "From Network to Community")

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The Christian religion which LSN seeks now to influence is the creation not of Jesus or the apostles but of Paul. This is hardly disputable among scholars today, even though it will come as a shock to "the faithful." The group that continued the mission of Jesus after his death saw themselves as sent, like him "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and only to them" (Matt 15:4), and certainly not called to take a new religion to the Roman empire. In the words of Raymond E. Brown, the eminent and conservative Catholic scholar, "You will only understand its instincts and reactions if you realise that they never dreamed of anything other than that they were Jews" (In a 1998 taped lecture, *The Beginnings of the Church*). Paul's Christianity was something quite different; as he says in *Galatians* (1:12), "I must emphasize that I did not take over the gospel that you heard me preach from any man; I received it through a personal revelation from Jesus Christ." (*Galatians* 1: 12). It is clear from the *Acts of the Apostles* (11:26) that Paul also invented the name "Christian", and as with Tony Blair's invention of the title "New Labour", it was intended to keep a semblance of continuity with the old while making a break with its founding principles, specifically with belief that Jesus was a spiritual leader for Jews alone. More generally, the break was with the orthodox Jesus movement, which Paul dismissed as "the party of circumcision" and ridiculed as "the snippers." Those Christians who continued to regard the Mosaic Law as the basis of authentic religion were, he said, "under a curse" (*Galatians* 3:10).

Despite such intemperate outbursts, Paul's Christianity existed within the original Jewish Jesus movement for about twenty five years in an uneasy relationship that can be traced between the lines in the New Testament. It would not be inaccurate to say that in agreeing with James, the younger brother of Jesus, to "send money for the poor of Jerusalem", he effectively bought a franchise licensing him to preach his version of Jesus to the gentiles well away from headquarters. What seemed at first like a mutually beneficial arrangement turned out to be less so, when Paul refused to convert his followers to Judaism. (With the exception of the luckless Timothy [Acts 16:3] who was circumcised as a sacrificial token to the authorities in Jerusalem). Paul was himself a Jew, so one must ask, what was it about Judaism that upset him so much, and what was it about Paul's understanding of Jesus that so upset the original Jesus movement?

There are very deep historical and psychological currents at work here, and while a summary statement must inevitably distort in simplifying, it is worthwhile attempting one in the present context, because the parallels are so striking. In a word, Paul, while keeping some aspects of the old version, was redefining religion. His own version, he was later to say in a more peace-making mode, was like a wild olive grafted onto the ancient stem (*Romans* 1:17), but it was

clearly a graft that did not take as far as Judaism was concerned. On the other hand, Christianity inherited the Jewish concept of God in one very important respect, and this is now proving a critical factor to spiritual seekers, not least to the LSN.

The religion of the Jews is basically a product of the late Bronze Age. Its model of God was based on an absolute potentate, and its purpose was to enlist the help of this imagined power and appease its anger. Like other tribal religions it sought to do this through sacrifice but, unlike them, primarily through ethical behaviour, following the commandments inscribed on stone tablets that Jahweh had handed personally to Moses on Mount Sinai. This story is one of Judaism's most powerful myths and has played a major part in shaping Western civilisation. Thereafter the Jewish religion developed along two diverging paths, the first being elaboration of the original ten commandments until the Law had grown to over three hundred specific rules of behaviour. The most spiritual Jew, by this criterion, was the man or woman who kept them all, which was not only impossible but risked turning Judaism into what a Jewish comedian once called systematized angst. The other route, preached by the later prophets, who foreshadowed the teaching of Jesus, was essentially through internalizing the law, making it increasingly natural and, as it were, instinctive. This is the process by which a child grows to maturity as it makes it own the rules it had once followed through obedience to its parents and conformity to society. The prophets were stoned not only because they disturbed people's conscience but because preaching an inner law, "written upon the heart", seemed suspiciously like rejecting the external Law which Jews even today regard as God's greatest gift to his chosen people.

In the long view of history one can see Judaism itself as a redefinition of religion, a revival of the monotheism of the Pharaoh Akhenaton but a conscious rejection of Egyptian orthodoxy with its worship of animal deities, its lack of sexual conscience and its obsession with the afterlife. This conclusion is speculation, but there is ample evidence for it in the Old Testament, and it is surely significant that the name Moses is Egyptian and not semitic. Be that as it may, Pauline Christianity followed a similar course, by taking over the best from Judaism but rejecting its main principle of the Law. Even though he was a devout Jew, "a Pharisee of Pharisees," Paul could never fully subscribe to a tribal religion, because he was a citizen of the Roman empire, and this split world view and split loyalty created a psychological tension that was dramatically resolved on the Damascus road. The same kind of tension is felt by those many spiritual seekers today who feel that they are Christians but belong to a world that has become greater than Christendom. Paul's conversion experience can be naturally interpreted as the sudden realisation that only a higher kind of religion could resolve his dilemma, and the shock was so great that it bowled him over, literally, and brought on what a doctor today would diagnose as hysterical blindness (*Acts* 9:5-9). The dynamic core of the new religion was to be not following the Law but seeking spiritual development, using Jesus of Nazareth as a model or template. Paul's most basic revelation was that Jesus was not unique in a totally absolute sense, as the Nicene Creed later declared, but was "the first born of a great new human family" (*Romans* 8:29). From this new perspective, a higher religion was now made possible, based on acquiring "the mind of Christ." The purpose of a

church was to be a community of those who were pursuing this goal, at least in principle.

God must have a sense of humour to have entrusted Paul with such a mission to transform the human species. A thin-skinned, pugnacious, blustering, boastful tent-maker, without the authority of ordination or theological training. (Jewish commentators, like Hyam Maccoby, tell us that his arguments citing the Law are pure flimflam.) He started Christianity from square one, without collaborators, organisation or premises and with scriptures put together from the Jewish Bible and whatever pagan hymns and texts could be pressed into service. He took on the Roman empire and the Judaic religion, both together and, though he did not know it when he died, his vision was on the way to overcoming both. He died with his boots on, hoping to spread the good news as far as Spain. Whatever else he lacked, he was blessed with energy and courage, but he must also have been blessed with a great power to love which had been released into a torrent by his understanding of the spiritual power of Jesus of Nazareth. A streetfighter with a heart as big as this was what the world needed. Like LSN members, he lived on the edge of a religion which had become imprisoned in its own high principles, and was unable to meet the religious demands of a world within which it lived. Paul sometimes gets a bad press today, because he seems in places anti-feminist (although his remarks must be understood in context and some of them were actually made by others), but he was clearly loved by the many women who appear in his letters. Overriding this objection is the undeniable fact that Paul proclaimed that in the new dispensation there was no longer distinction between “Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female” (Galatians 3:28). Paul was the bridge that took the spirituality of Jesus to a wider world and sowed the seed that was to result in the civilisation of the Middle Ages and all the values that have been absorbed in the culture that we call the West.

Facing institutional inertia, and even hostility, and a society dedicated to materialism, LSN may feel that it is climbing Mount Impossible, but nothing so impossible as Paul’s task of preaching an obscure Jew and convicted felon as a universal model to the non-Jewish world. Paul’s answer was to package the central message within Greek and oriental myths to which the ordinary people of the Roman empire could relate, and in so doing he transformed a Jewish prophet, mystic and healer into a latter day Apollo, the golden young man and ideal human who was the literal son of Zeus. This was the core of a complex myth in which the state execution of Jesus was transformed into a sacrificial offering to the great Sky God for mankind’s sin. The total myth is an incomparable drama and was perfectly believable in its time and until the advent of science, but is believable no longer, and cannot serve as a means of spiritualising the world. Paradoxically, the science which killed the myth has now replaced it with a greater story, a narrative theology which enables Paul’s core teaching about Jesus the man to make enormous sense within an evolutionary context. Jesus, we can now see, was indeed a “new Adam”, as Paul described him, an inspiring example of a new kind of human being.

The historical sequence of religious development, from birth through maturity to decay and ossification, can be seen as successive turns in an upward spiral path, each turn taking religion to a higher level, where it discovers something new but also rediscovers ancient eternal truths and gains new insight into them. If this process has not come to an end, Judaism and Christianity can

be seen as precursors of an emergent new kind of religion, which must grow out of current orthodoxy, but leave it behind. Thus LSN's struggle to find definition and purpose within traditional Christianity can be interpreted as the start of the next turn on this evolutionary spiral. Birth into a new and scary world goes with the confused need to escape from the old and constricting world, and that is where we are today. Desire to stay within the warmth and security of the womb is in tension with the desire to enter into a new kind of experience. Pursuing this analogy, it might be true to say that LSN is in the birth canal.

## The Sacrament of Education

Many things hold us back from entering into a new spiritual future. We are tied down like Gulliver by a thousand threads, and for Christians the main thread that must be cut is attachment to the Christian myth, which has become confused with Christian truth itself in many eyes. One is defined as a Christian not because one imitates Jesus but because one publicly declares belief in the historical truth of certain unbelievable events, such as the virginal conception of Jesus. The initial Christian myth of creation and incarnation had a powerful simplicity and was easily believable in an earlier, and largely illiterate age, but today it is not believable. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that in clinging to the myth and (for the most part) a top-down hierarchy of authority, institutional Christianity has decayed to a stage where it cannot distinguish between the fruit and the peel. Popular Christian belief is largely belief in a fantasy Jesus, who is worshipped and prayed to. Can one imagine anyone who knew him, say his brothers and sisters, behaving towards him like this? If Mark is telling the truth, they seemed to think he was more than a bit odd when they "set out to take charge of him" (3:21), but this intriguing episode is invariably glossed over in New Testament studies. The real Jesus was a spiritually advanced human – of that there is no doubt – and an inspirational teacher and healer, but he was limited like all of us by the context of his times. He would have believed that the earth was flat, serious illness was caused by demons, spittle was a quasi-magical healing fluid, and so on. He would certainly have insisted that would-be followers who were gentiles must first be circumcised into Judaism, as is testified by the fact that his brother James, who took over the Jesus movement, made this a condition of membership. There is a well supported judgement among scriptural scholars that less than twenty per cent of the words and acts attributed to Jesus in the gospels were actually said and done by him. This leads to the very significant conclusion that within a generation of his death there were individuals saying and writing things that were indistinguishable from what we assume Jesus himself would have said. There was already by then a Jesus meme, the spirituality of Jesus had spread to an identifiable group.

The only way now of acquiring and propagating this "essential spirituality" in the twenty first century is through education: this is the way to salvation today. Without a deeper understanding of Christian origins, we cannot know what Christianity really means, who we are or in what direction to go in order to fulfil our spiritual potential. If the first step into the future is to strip away the mythical and legendary from Christianity, it follows that new levels of education, especially of historical education, must be attempted. One might indeed talk of the super-

sacrament of history, for knowledge of where we have come from, and how, will be essential in plotting a future course.

Two centuries ago the church engaged in a similar debate about education, the question then being whether or not one could be a full Christian without being able to read and write, since the illiterate were denied direct access to the Bible. The debate was settled decisively by the founding of schools, for adults and children, and the proliferation of Bible classes, and a similar initiative is now called for on at least as great a scale. An illiterate community must always remain in thrall to the myth and to “authority”, and today a new kind of literacy is called for if we are to escape from both. The established churches have at best a feeble sense of this need for systematic education, and hence there is no “trickle down” from an educated ministry to the pews. “What kind of education?” is too vast a question to embark upon in a short response to the issue of LSN’s future, for it covers much more than academic history. Indeed, at the heart of the new education is learning how to pray. In general, though, it must be transformative education, and the recent appearance of this term in the literature (e.g., by Edmund O’Sullivan and Thomas Berry) is a sign that something new is stirring.