

The Unraveling of Christianity

The flyer for this Workshop confidently announced "...the whole Catholic/Christian enterprise as it was presented for almost 2000 years is beginning to unravel." Surely that statement is an exaggeration. Not true. Did you notice the commotion within the Anglican/Episcopal Communion when, on Dec. 21, 2007, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, announced that the Christmas story, so dear to Christians, was probably not true but a powerful legend. He specifically said that there was no manger, there was no star in the East, there were no three kings, Jesus was probably not born in a stable, and the virgin birth is highly questionable. It is an edifying story, but it is not factual. Across the world Anglican and Episcopalian Bishops weighed in, some siding with Williams, others, while not denying what he said, characterized his timing for the statement, four days before Christmas, as particularly unfortunate. Can you imagine the Pope having the courage to proclaim that truth to the Catholic faithful? Hardly. Look, sooner or later, fundamentalism notwithstanding, the faithful in the pews of all the Christian denominations are going to have to face up to the fact that the Bible, including the New Testament, does not tell us what God has said to humankind so much as what our spiritual ancestors have had to say to us about God. It has been over a century since that truth was discovered by Scripture scholars, but preachers, for fear of scandalizing believers, have by and large adopted a policy of shielding the faithful from those findings. That means that for more than a century now Traditional Christianity has been living on borrowed time.

When we were being instructed in the faith at our mother's knee — though we didn't know it — the clock was already ticking. When the good nuns formed us in the Catholic tradition — the clock was ticking. In high school when we were again assured of the truths of the Catholic faith — the clock was ticking. In college as we became adults — the clock was ticking. When we married and tried to share the faith of our ancestors with our own children — the clock was ticking. When we went through our mid-life crises — the clock was ticking. The findings of the experts have at long last begun to trickle down to the people in the pews. Many of our own family members and loved ones died in happy ignorance of those findings. But we, by the grace and will of God, have lived long enough to be forced to deal with the fact that the clock has stopped ticking. Time is now up! Like it or not, the total unraveling of "Traditional Christianity" has finally begun on our watch.

No one is claiming that authentic Christianity is coming to an end any time soon. Not at all. The claim is that "Traditional Christianity" is now beginning a rather rapid decline but that authentic "Christian faith" will only completely disappear if it is NOT profoundly transformed. Two thousand years of "Traditional Christianity" is more than enough. The next thousand years (the so-called "third millennium") belongs to the Holy Spirit's work of transforming all the parochial divisive religions of the world, not just Christianity, in favor of a "spirituality" which honors God and unifies humankind. (Remember Viktor Frankl's

monoanthropism?) Naturally, we shall not live to see that work fulfilled, but we are called to witness and participate in its beginnings within our Catholic Church. Vatican II was already a step in that direction. Unfortunately it has been undermined and its effect blunted by John Paul II and Benedict XVI. But, as our own lived experience teaches us, opposition to the Spirit can never really be successful. In the end, the Spirit always wins out.

Key Elements In The Decline

1. The Revised View of Scripture

For centuries (actually two millennia) believers never doubted that the Bible says it like it is. How could they? After all, it was purported to be "the Word of God". Now in increasing numbers believers are having to face the harsh fact that Scripture may not be the sort of thing they thought it was. If the Christmas story isn't factual, one cannot help but wonder what other things in Scripture presumed to be factually real — aren't? The list is growing. In the Old Testament: the Creation story, the Adam & Eve story, the Abraham story, the Noah and the Ark story, the Sodom & Gomorrah story, the Moses story etc. In the New Testament: the Annunciation story, the Christmas story, Jesus' Baptism story, the Wedding at Cana story, the Lazarus story, the Palm Sunday story, the post-crucifixion stories etc. The non-factual nature of those, and other, legends is causing people to lose faith in the traditional concept of revelation.

Nonetheless, the Bible remains one of the most important documents in human history. It is replete with legendary stories which, like Shakespeare, have become part of the spiritual heritage not only of Jews and Christians but of the whole human race. No one denies that. The issue is that for two thousand years believers have looked on the Bible as *God-made*, whereas it is really *man-made*. What was thought to be of time transcending value turns out to be historically dated and part of the "social world" of the particular Scripture writer involved. When Paul counsels "wives be subject to your husbands" — that should not be taken to be a timeless truth, but a reflection of the times in which he lived. As Marcus Borg has observed: "Social world" is an important and illuminating shorthand term. It refers to the social environment of a particular time and place. It basically means the same as "culture", understood as everything that humans add to nature. It is the social canopy under which people live. A very comprehensive term, it includes political and economic systems, codes of behavior and convention, understandings of what is real and how to live, religious traditions and practices, language, technology and more. [Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 2006, p. 78]

Similarly, when the Gospel writers have Jesus condemn divorce and remarriage — that too is a function of the "social world" of that time. Contemporary experience reveals that some second marriages can be edifying and authentic signs of the "kingdom". So, the question

becomes: are we to follow the "social world" of first century Palestine, or be allowed to create a whole new "social world" in keeping with what the Holy Spirit is revealing to humankind now? That also applies to the issue of gay and lesbian relationships. To take the condemnations in Scripture as definitive, is to adopt the "social world" of ancient Israel, when all the signs are that the Holy Spirit is trying to reveal to us that such relationships can be good and signs of the "kingdom" Jesus preached. As I said in *Morality & Its Beyond*, in some instances such relationships actually achieve the level of being "sacrament" for the believing community. This revised view of Scripture is the primary impetus for the unraveling of Traditional Christianity in our day.

2. The Holy Spirit

A second source of energy for the current unraveling is the fact that Spirit has been outrageously overlooked in "Traditional Christianity". To safeguard the centrality of Christ, Scripture speaks of Spirit as Jesus' gift and portrays Spirit as coming into the world only after Jesus. Imagine how embarrassing it would be to call Jesus the "Savior of the world" and have the Holy Spirit out there doing its thing unrelated to Jesus. To avoid that embarrassment, our ancestors in faith linked the Holy Spirit to Christ, so much so that in Christian circles the Holy Spirit became known as "the Spirit of Christ". You did not find One without the Other.

Marvelous. There's just one problem. The followers of Jesus would not have been able to recognize him as "the Offspring of God" were it not for the presence of the Holy Spirit within them. That means that the Holy Spirit was already "in the world" before Jesus — not after. To hold otherwise takes you right back to the then and there and leaves no room for the here and now. You get stuck in the historical and cultural limitations of first century Palestine. Actually, the Holy Spirit is present to us now and has been present throughout the whole of human history. Anywhere anything good and noble has happened among us, there the Spirit of God has been active. The Holy Spirit's presence encompasses all of human history. That means, in Christian terms, that God has entered human history not once but twice. First as God's Spirit lavished on all of creation thus permeating human life from the beginning, and second as Jesus the Christ.

Spirit, then, is the inexorable power of union within all of creation. Spirit is what creates, preserves and integrates life in the cosmos, and even the cosmos itself. Spirit is the divine present throughout all of God's creation. Spirit is the force behind the process of convergence within humanity — is a pre-requisite for the Coming of the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed. To have ignored Spirit and, when not ignored, to have limited Spirit within Christian parochial boundaries — is indeed outrageous.

Now how, you ask, does all that contribute to the present unraveling? Certainly love, compassion and all sorts of human goodness existed in the world before Jesus. But those things are not simply laudable human occurrences, they are the work of the Spirit wherever they occur. That is why the path of goodness is the path to God — i.e. one is only able to journey that path thanks to the presence of the Spirit. Whenever in human history a person followed that path she moved godward even if totally unrelated to Christ or Christianity. The conclusion is that thanks to the Spirit, the Christian enterprise is not the only game in town, there are many other ways to move godward, Christianity is only one of the many "divine franchises". That leads to the conclusion that if one withdraws from Christianity that does not necessarily mean they give up on moving godward. One may choose to remain Catholic/Christian, but that is no longer an absolute necessity. The lessening of that "necessity" contributes to the current unraveling.

3. Democracy

The popes and bishops never tire of reminding us that the Catholic Church is not a democracy. So blind are they that they actually think that keeping their adult members in subservience and a kind of abject obedience is God's will as a positive. They fail to see that the spread of democracy is really the work of the Spirit, and they fail to appreciate that "Traditional Christianity" cannot be attractive to people raised from childhood on democratic principles. Among such people there is a natural urge to expunge authoritarianism and claims of dogmatic infallibility from their lives. That urge adds to the current impetus for unraveling.

4. Feminism & The Role of Women

If "Traditional Christianity" were only "hierarchical" 21st century folks just might be able to accept it. (I guess I really don't believe that.) But, unfortunately, it is also "patriarchal", which prevents it from taking half the human race seriously. At a time when the marginalization of women is receding in cultures all around the world, it remains virulently present in the Catholic Church. In the face of history, Catholic Church authorities continue to publicly proclaim the secondary status not only of women but of lay Catholics as well. Outrageous. Such patent stupidity contributes added impetus to the current forces for unraveling.

5. Monoanthropism vs. Exclusivity

And finally, we should recall the words of Viktor Frankl:

Another step now must be taken, thousands of years after mankind developed monotheism,

the belief in the one God. Monotheism is not enough; it will not do. What we need is not only the belief in the one God but also the awareness of the one mankind, the awareness of the unity of humanity. I would call it "mono-anthropism".

Frankl contends that the millennia-long belief in "one God", while an important development in human history, is no longer enough to insure human survival on the planet. If we are not to be destroyed by the hateful divisions, sectarianism, violence and war that mark our era, we must come to truly believe in "one humanity". We are all sisters and brothers, occupants of the same planet, connected to one another by our common humanity and by the presence of the Spirit within.

Jesus revealed to us that God's dream for humankind involves emancipation from all that keeps us divided and "at war" with one another. Just as there is but "one God", so, there is to be "one people" in whom God dwells. That's the dream, that's the goal, that's always been the goal, and that's the very reason we have Church and is the deepest, truest meaning of the word "Catholic". Instead, "being Catholic" has become a sign of exclusivity separating us from our sisters and brothers in the world.

This contributes to unraveling because people recognize that such a stance not only separates them from others it separates them from the dream and mission of authentic Christianity as well.

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