

An Outline Review

of

Huston Smith's

The World's Religions

(Our Great Wisdom Traditions)

Chapter VIII. Christianity

Nearly two thousand years of history have brought an astonishing diversity to this religion. From this dazzling and often bewildering complex, first will be indicated the central strands that unite this religion, and then part two will deal with its three major divisions: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism.

Part One: The central strands that unite this religion

A. The Historical Jesus. - What Jesus said about himself

1. "The Spirit of the Lord Is Upon Me."

Jesus opened his ministry by quoting this statement from Isaiah and adding, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled." We must attend to this Spirit that Jesus experienced as empowering him, for there can be no understanding of his life and work if it is omitted.

Not only was Spirit not spatially removed; though invisible, it could be known.

Often it would take the initiative and announce itself. It did this supremely to Moses on Mount Sinai, but it also spoke in a small voice to Elijah, in lions' roars to other prophets, and in dramatic events like the Exodus.

That Jesus stood in the Jewish tradition of Spirit-filled mediators is the most important fact for understanding his historical career.

His immediate predecessor in this tradition was John the Baptist; and at his initiation / baptism he (John) saw "the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him (Jesus) like a dove."

Having descended, the Spirit "drove" Jesus into the wilderness where, during forty days of prayer and fasting, he consolidated the Spirit that had entered him. Having done so he reentered the world, empowered.

2. "By the Spirit of God I Cast Out Demons."

The Spirit-filled personages of the Bible have power, exceptional power, something ordinary mortals lack. The Gospels attribute these powers to Jesus copiously.

He used the Spirit that coursed through him not just to heal individuals but, and this was his aspiration, to heal all humanity, beginning with his own people.

3. "Thy Kingdom Come, on Earth."

Jesus' mission was to crack the shell of Judaism in which revelation was encased and release that revelation to a ready and waiting world.

Putting it this way does not cancel the need for a

continuing Jewish presence. Until the world is regenerated, the witness of a nation of priests remain relevant.

B. The Christ of Faith. - What his disciples said about Jesus

What they heard him say, and what they sensed him to be caused his followers to believe they had seen God in human form.

1. "He Went About Doing Good."

Almost all of his extraordinary deeds were performed quietly, apart from the crowds, and as a demonstration of the power of faith.

2. "Never Spoke Man Thus."

The teachings of Jesus have an urgency, an ardent, vivid quality, an abandon, a complete absence of second-rate material.

His teachings carry an extravagance that invited people to see things differently, confident that if they did so their behavior would change accordingly.

His teachings focused on the two most important facts about life: God's overwhelming love of humanity, and the need for people to accept that love and let it flow through them to others.

Jesus tried to convey God's absolute love for every single human being.

3. "We Have Seen His Glory."

But what he did and what he said would not have been enough to edge his disciples toward the conclusion that he was divine.

It came to the point where they felt that as they looked at Jesus they were looking at something resembling God in human form.

C. The End and the Beginning. - The way that Jesus' earthly ministry ended

He was crucified.

Within a short time his followers were preaching the gospel of their Risen Lord.

His disciples were convinced of Jesus, resurrection.

He did not simply resume his former physical body; resurrection was not resuscitation. It was entry into another mode of being.

Jesus' followers experienced him in a new way; as having the qualities of God.

Faith in Jesus' resurrection produced the Church and its Christology.

This faith extended ultimately to the status of goodness in the universe, contending that it was all-powerful, victorious over everything, even death itself.

D. The Good News.

Conventional love is evoked by loveable qualities in the beloved, but the love people encountered from Christ

embraced sinners and outcasts, Samaritans and enemies. It gave not prudentially in order to receive, but because giving was its nature.

Once that love of Christ reached the first Christians it could not be stopped.

Three intolerable burdens had suddenly and dramatically lifted from their shoulders:

The fear of death

The burden of guilt

The cramping confines of the ego

E. The Mystical Body of Christ.

The disciples went out to possess a world they believed God had already possessed for them.

Images came to mind to characterize the intense corporate identity they felt. The first came from Christ himself: "I am the vine, you are the branches."

Saint Paul adapted Christ's image by using the human body instead of a vine to symbolize the Church. Christ is the head; individual Christians are its cells.

In what sense there is salvation apart from the Body of Christ is a question on which Christians differ.

F. The Mind of the Church.

It was not the disciples' minds that were first drawn to Jesus; it was their experience.

It was only a matter of time before Christians felt the need to understand this mystery in order to explain it to themselves and to others. Christian theology was born, and from then on the Church was head as well as heart.

Christianity's three most distinctive tenets are:

1. The Incarnation - In Christ God assumed a human body, it is affirmed that Christ was God-Man; simultaneously both fully God and fully man.

2. The Atonement

Its root meaning is reconciliation. Two metaphors have dominated the Church's understanding of this occurrence.

a. One, legalistic, runs as follows: all people sin, sin demands infinite recompense. God made this payment through the Person of Christ and the debt is canceled.

b. Christendom's presiding metaphor on this topic has been release from the bondage. The bondage that imprisons us is ego, an attachment to ourselves, with the fear and guilt that trail in its wake.

3. The Trinity

This doctrine holds that while God is fully one, God is also three: God the father, Christ the Son and The Holy Spirit.

"The Godhead is a Society of three divine persons, knowing and loving each other so entirely that not merely can none exist without the others, but in some mysterious way each is what the other is."

Part Two: The three major divisions of Christianity

What has gone before is an interpretation of the points that, substantially at least, Christians hold in common. For roughly half its history the church remained substantially one institution. Starting in 1054, however, great divisions began to occur. Our concern now is to try to understand the central perspectives of Christendom's three great branches.

A. Roman Catholicism.

The two most important concepts for the understanding of this branch of Christendom:

1. The Church as Teaching Authority - The Church points the way in which we should live.

Ultimately, this idea of the Church as teaching authority shapes the idea of papal infallibility.

After studying a problem that relates to faith or morals, he emerges with the Church's answer - on these rare occasions it is not strictly speaking *an* answer, it is *the* answer and binding on Roman Catholics.

For such occasions the Holy Spirit protects him from the possibility of error.

2. The Church as Sacramental Agent - The Church empowers us to live in accordance with its teachings.

Christ called his followers to live lives far above the average in charity and service. Help, therefore, is needed and The Church provides it by means of its seven Sacraments:

a. Baptism

b. Confirmation

c. Holy Matrimony

d. Holy Orders

e. the Sacrament of the Sick (extreme unction)

f. Reconciliation (confession)

g. the Mass

B. Eastern Orthodoxy.

In most ways the Eastern Orthodox Church stands close to the Roman Catholic. It honors the same seven Sacraments

On the teaching authority there is some difference. The Eastern Church has no Pope; it holds that God's truth is disclosed through "the conscience of the Church."

It stands midway between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Two clearly distinctive features are:

1. Its exceptionally corporate view of the Church - Each Christian is working out his or her salvation in conjunction with the rest of the Church, not individually to save a separate soul.

2. Its mysticism: The Eastern Church encourages the mystical life more actively. Mysticism is a practical program even for the laity.

C. Protestantism.

The bulk of its faith and practices it shares with Catholicism and

Orthodoxy but with two great enduring themes:

1. Justification by Faith

When Protestantism says that human beings are justified - that is, restored to right relations with the ground of their being, and with their associates - by faith, it is saying that such restoration requires a movement of the total self, in mind, will and affections, all three.

It is a mark of the strength of the ecumenical movement in our time that the Roman Catholic theologians now increasingly understand faith in the same way.

Faith is a personal phenomenon. No number of religious observances, no record of good deeds, no roster of doctrines believed could guarantee that an individual would reach his or her desired state.

It does not mean that the Creeds or the Sacraments are unimportant. It means that unless these are accompanied by the experience of God's love and a returning love for God, they are insufficient. Similarly with good works.

2. The Protestant Principle

Stated philosophically, it warns against absolutizing the relative. Stated theologically, it warns against idolatry.

Human allegiance belongs to God. God, however is beyond nature and history and cannot be equated with either or any of his parts. God is infinite.

People, however, continually slip; first deifying wood and stone idols and later Christians fell to absolutizing dogmas, the Sacraments, the Church, the Bible, or

personal religious experience.

None of them is God. They point beyond themselves to God, but let any of them claim absolute or unreserved allegiance and it becomes diabolical.

God transcends all the limitations and distortions of finite existence. Therefore, in the Protestant view, every human claim to absolute truth or finality must be rejected.

This brings the need for continual self-criticism and reformation to the door of Protestantism itself.
