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CULTURE, RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, AND MYTH: WHAT CHRISTIANITY IS NOT

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SYNOPSIS

The word *Christianity* is not automatically associated in popular use with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, or even with the belief in those historic events that is expressed in the creeds of the church. Christianity more often is defined or described as either a culture, a religion, a philosophy, or a myth. It is none of these, however. Unlike culture, which can only instruct us in how to interact with others in our group, Christianity answers our deeper need: to know that we possess intrinsic value. Unlike religion, which teaches us that we must earn our salvation, Christianity shows us how to access a salvation that has already been won. Unlike philosophy, which seeks after abstract truth, Christianity offers us Truth as a person. Unlike myth, which embodies the desires of a thousand cultures, Christianity provides the historical fulfillment of those desires.

Plato's "Republic" is the greatest book ever written on the subject of justice. In this timeless dialogue, Socrates constructs a full and nuanced definition of the nature and function of justice by building (in his imagination) an ideal state within which justice can be identified and studied. Socrates pauses to clear the ground, however, before attempting to lay the foundations for his ideal state. One by one, he allows his friends to share their definition of justice, then systematically explodes each of these definitions by revealing its inherent flaws. Only after he has cleared away the debris of false definitions of justice does he proceed toward a true definition of justice.

Just as Plato felt a need in his day to distinguish true justice from its many counterfeits, so is there a need in our day to distinguish true Christianity from its many counterfeits. Perhaps the best way to do this is to follow Plato's lead—that is, to seek out a clearer, more precise definition of what Christianity *is* by first determining what it is *not*. We shall consider below four things that often masquerade as Christianity: culture, religion, philosophy, and myth. Though these four things resemble Christianity and are even related to Christianity, they are by no means equivalent to it.

NOT A CULTURE

As a university professor I am in constant contact with international students from such diverse countries as Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and India. I have found that one of the greatest stumbling blocks to international students who are interested in learning about Christianity is the long-standing misconception that Christianity and Western culture are inextricably bound together. It is true that much that is excellent and lasting in the cultures of Europe and America owes a great debt to biblical precepts; however, it does not therefore follow that Western culture and Christianity are two sides of the same coin.

The claims that Jesus made and the gospel that He taught (or, rather, effected) have little, if anything, to do with culture. One of the greatest innovations in modern missions indeed was inspired by the recognition that the gospel of Christ transcends the narrow confines of race and culture. Gone are the days of the Victorian missionary who would bring to India and Africa a gospel laden with British cultural values and prejudices. Once he has shared with the native population the good news that Jesus died for their sins and rose again, the modern missionary seeks to set up *indigenous* churches that will eventually be led and managed by the native peoples themselves. His goal is not to convert the natives to a Christian culture, but to "let them in" on the news that God's love for the people of the world was so great that He left behind His heavenly throne to become one of these people. This is indeed great news, a message that has relevance for all nations and for all cultures.

What is culture, after all? It has to do, I suggest, with the way we interact; it sets up what the French historian Michel Foucault has called "discursive structures."[1] The function of these structures is to facilitate and define the boundaries of such interactions, and by so doing guide us through the many rituals that give life meaning and continuity (e.g., adolescence, courtship, marriage, and death). Our cultural heritage and the rich traditions on which this heritage is founded are what direct us to the questions and the problems that have most plagued our ethnic forebears, that let us know when it is proper to laugh or cry, to sing or dance, to love or hate, and that provide us with a strategy for dealing with the joys and the hardships of life. Culture helps to make life a comprehensible and manageable experience by setting down rules that everybody (at least everybody in our "group") agrees to play by, and by helping us to find our own place within this well-defined "discursive structure."

There is at least one thing, however, that culture cannot do for us: it cannot assure us that we possess *intrinsic* value *apart* from our culture, race, profession, class, or gender. At some point in our lives, we all must ask ourselves the simple question: How do I know that I am valuable? Most of us respond to this internal question with stock answers. One person may say that he knows that he has value because he has a high-paying job; another because she has two beautiful children; and others a great athletic career or a well-disciplined mind. But what if he loses his job or her children die in a car crash or his knee is shattered or she contracts Alzheimer's disease? Have these four people lost their value and worth as individuals? Surely not! There must be another answer to this question, one that is more secure, that is built on a foundation that cannot be shattered by economic shifts or accidental deaths or unexpected injuries or terrible diseases.

Christianity offers us two answers to this question: the first partial, the second full. The partial answer, one that Christianity shares with some (though far from all) other religions, is that we know we have intrinsic value because we were created in the image of God. I would argue, however, that this answer is not, on its own, a sufficient ground for securing our full value and worth. It is not enough for children to know the identity of their biological father; if they do not also know that he desires a relationship with them and that he accepts and loves them unconditionally, they may doubt their own value as human beings. We need something more than the knowledge that we were created in the image of God, and that something more is to be found only in Christianity.

According to Paul, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).[2] Beyond our need for acceptance in the cultural group is the universal, transcultural need to be loved unconditionally, to be accepted for who we are as individuals, to be judged worthy by the one who created us. Jesus died for us while we were still sinners, while there was nothing in us to love. We were *not* worthy (hence our innate yearning for love and acceptance), but Jesus *made* us worthy by providing a way by which we could take upon ourselves (and into ourselves) the very holiness of Christ. In this life-giving and worth-affirming exchange, we (as fallen human beings of whatever culture or race) cast our sins and our burdens on Christ, and He, in return (as the Savior of *all* peoples), ascribes to us His own glory and worthiness. This, rather than culture, is the ultimate basis of human value and worth.

NOT A RELIGION

Yes, technically, Christianity is one of the world religions. If we are to get to the core of what Christianity *is* (and not just how most people classify it), however, then we must carefully distinguish it not only from

the other major religions, but from the very concept of religion itself, for true Christianity runs counter to the essential nature and goal of religion.

Religion, if I may venture a general definition, is a man-made attempt to reach up to God, to deduce His nature, and to learn ways to appease Him. It manifests itself in the formation of a ladder-like system by which man, through performing good works and/or spiritual disciplines, can "climb" his way up to God. Religion views mankind, in general, as weak (either morally, spiritually, or perceptually), yet able either to merit God's favor or gain special knowledge that will unite him with God through persistence in his religious walk. This religious walk encompasses faithfulness to a culturally defined set of rules and regulations; public and private worship of God; the fostering of such virtues as honesty, steadfastness, kindness, and charity; and the performance of various good deeds. Though specific teachings and precepts differ from religion to religion, though the expounders of these teachings differ in their emphases and their ethnic origins, though the living and true God sometimes is replaced with other deities, and though some followers believe their religious walk will take them through several lives instead of just one, most of the religions of the world can be encompassed by this definition.

Many of the qualities of a religious walk as described in the previous paragraph overlap with Christianity as it is lived out by most of its adherents; yet, despite the similarity in the kinds of behaviors that both Christianity and religion elicit from their followers, the way in which Christianity defines both the problem that mankind faces and its solution sets Christianity directly at odds with religion. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this dichotomy is to examine a common misconception, a saying that people ascribe, incorrectly, to Christianity: "God helps them who help themselves." Ask five randomly chosen Americans where this saying comes from, and at least three will say that it comes from the Bible. It does not. The source of this saying is, in fact, *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1757) by Benjamin Franklin.

The message of the Bible is not "the Lord helps those who help themselves," but "the Lord helps those who are helpless." Christianity has to do not with man reaching up to God, but with God reaching down to man and offering him salvation as a free, undeserved gift; not with man attempting to justify himself, but with God invading history and making forgiveness possible by taking the sins of the world upon Himself. According to the Bible, we live in a fallen, sinful world, a world populated by men and women who are in rebellion against God and who are thus separated from His loving presence. We all are guilty of sin; we all possess what the church calls "original sin," but which the Bible more accurately calls a "sinful nature." Everything we do flows ultimately out of this sinful nature and is tainted by it. God in His holiness and perfection cannot have such sinfulness in His presence; He is obliged to judge it, to cast it out. Christians do not gain salvation by their own merit (trying to do so would be like mopping a floor with dirty water), but because the God-man, Jesus Christ, who was the only human to live and not sin, took the punishment for our sin upon Himself. Salvation is not a prize diligently to be earned, but a gift humbly to be received; it is not the endpoint of our religious walk, but the beginning of it. In Christianity, one's good deeds *follow* one's salvation; works for the Christian are not a means to an end, but an outpouring of love, a way of saying thank you to Jesus for the salvation He has already given us.

It is no surprise that Jesus' earthly ministry was preceded by that of John the Baptist. The root of John's message was repentance: recognize that you are a sinner and can do nothing of your own to flee the wrath of God. This was a rather gloomy message to say the least, but one that prepared the way for the greatest message that the world has ever heard. You see, John did not preach the gospel; he preached a message that established the *need* for the gospel. It was Jesus who then stepped in and who, by dying on the cross, provided a way for us to be delivered from the wrath of God.

The number one reason, I believe, why people do not accept Jesus as their Savior is not because they doubt His claims, but, quite simply, because they do not think they need to be saved by another. They can take care of salvation on their own; they are masters of their own fate. If salvation means giving up a few things and living in a certain way (i.e., religion), then they're ready to tackle it; but they believe that when they reach heaven they will be in debt to no one. The biblical law, however, reveals to us our sin and guilt before a righteous and holy God, which leads us to despair of any attempt on our own to earn salvation.

Only when we realize our desperate need will we look to another to save us. Religion is man's way: it bolsters the ego but is finally ineffectual. Grace is God's way: it offends but it saves.

NOT A PHILOSOPHY

Most philosophers are quite passionate in their search for true knowledge—the term *philosophy*, after all, means "love of wisdom." The philosopher attempts to define and categorize the laws of truth and justice, for example, as the scientist attempts to define and categorize the laws of nature. Unlike the great poet-philosophers (e.g., Homer, Solomon, Dante, and Milton), who sought after truth as if it were a divine (and often feminine) presence, other philosophers seek a more removed, less personal, and generally abstract type of wisdom. For Homer, love is a beautiful goddess; but for Plato, love is an abstract form, a perfect idea. For Aeschylus, ethics is an almost visionary force embodied in a great human/divine trial; but for Aristotle, ethics is a certain set of rules, behaviors, and motivations that can be catalogued as succinctly as the laws of physics.

Many consider Christianity to be a philosophy, and, of course, there *are* elements of Christianity that are philosophical; certainly the books of Job and Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament and many passages from the letters of Paul in the New Testament have philosophical components. The gospel message, however, the good news that Jesus' death and resurrection saves us from our sins, has very little to do with philosophy (though theologians often use philosophical terms to describe the nature of this salvation). We can think of philosophy as a gifted individual sitting at a desk trying to capture an abstract notion of salvation in concrete terminology, one that aligns with certain accepted principles of logic; whereas we can think of Christianity as God taking on human flesh, invading the earth to effect a salvation that is so real, so concrete, that no philosophical system can contain it. The former is an idea, a carefully wrought mental construct; the latter is a living reality. The first is merely words; the second is words conveying power.

A Christian is someone who accepts not an idea, not a system, not a cosmology, but a *person*. In terms of the world religions, we may say that Buddha is the founder of Buddhism, Muhammad is the founder of Islam, and Zoroaster is the founder of Zoroastrianism. In terms of the various philosophical schools, we may also say that Plato, Kant, and Nietzsche are, respectively, the founders of the Platonic, Kantian, and Nietzschean schools of philosophy. It is not really correct, however, to say that Jesus *founded* Christianity. He is not the founder of Christianity; He *is* Christianity. Jesus did not only show us the way to find or reach God; He *became* the Way. Jesus, like Plato and Buddha, taught truths and furthered both philosophical light and religious life, but Jesus alone claimed to *be* Truth and Light and Life (John 14:6; 9:5; 11:25). Jesus is our Shepherd, our Guide who leads us into the sheepfold (i.e., heaven, salvation), but He is also (and uniquely) the door (or gate) to the sheepfold through which we must pass if we are to find pasture: "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture" (John 10:9).

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul sets forth clearly the difference between Christianity and philosophy. "My purpose," he writes, "is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments" (2:2–4). Mystery, wisdom, knowledge: for the Christian, these lie in Christ Himself, not in any system of philosophy, no matter how fine-sounding (or even rational) the arguments of that system might be. There is a richness of understanding locked up in Christianity, but that treasure chest of glorious wisdom resides fully in that Living Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. It is Jesus Himself who is the beginning and end of all true wisdom.

That is not to say that Christianity invalidates or even discourages the application of the mind to philosophical questions. Indeed, by affirming that Jesus was and is the Living Word or *Logos* (John 1), Christianity affirms (in contrast to postmodernism) that human language is meaningful—it is capable of expressing truth that is not merely one of many theories, but is a reality that is absolute and knowable. Still, lest anyone think that philosophy alone can lead one to heaven and that salvation can reside in anything other than the person of Jesus Christ, Paul issues a warning: "See to it that no one takes you

captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col. 2:8).

NOT A MYTH

Like most students in the last several decades, I was exposed in high school (and again in college) to the ancient Epic of Gilgamesh. I was fascinated by Gilgamesh's heroic exploits, as I was by those of Achilles, Odysseus, Beowulf, and a score of other mythological heroes. I was particularly thrilled by the story of a great flood that was told to Gilgamesh by the ancient sage, Utnapishtim. In discussing this specific episode our teacher was quick to inform us (quite truthfully) that the extant literature of most of the ancient civilizations contains similar flood accounts. He then concluded (much too hastily) that this was clear proof that the story of Noah and the Ark in Genesis was but one of many flood myths. I wanted to raise my hand and suggest to my teacher that this phenomenon might be interpreted in a different way, namely, that the plethora of flood myths strongly suggests that there was indeed an actual flood that persisted in the memories of many nations, and that the biblical account might possibly be read as the accurate, historical record of an event that in other nations retained only its mythic value. The force of secular humanism being what it is in our modern schools, however, I chose to remain silent.

There are many people in universities and seminaries who are willing to concede the modernist (i.e., secular humanist) view that Genesis 1–11 (if not the whole Pentateuch) possesses nothing but mythic value, if only modernists will give historical credence to the gospel narrative. The modernists have not reciprocated; indeed, for most modernists in the secular, liberal academy and media, the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are not historical events, but merely embody another legendary variation on an old mythic theme. In a 1971 lecture later published in *Myths to Live By*, comparative anthropologist Joseph Campbell stated, "There are myths and legends of the Virgin Birth, of Incarnations, Deaths and Resurrections, Second Comings, Judgments, and the rest, in all of the great traditions."[3] It is true that these stories bear some resemblance (in widely varying degrees) to their biblical counterparts; however, the conclusions that Campbell draws from this fact (like those of my high school teacher) do not follow. He argues,

> Since such images stem from the psyche [and] refer back to the psyche, they cannot be interpreted properly as references, originally, universally, essentially, and most meaningfully, to local historical events or personages. The historical references, if they have any meaning at all, must be secondary; as, for instance, in Buddhist thinking, where the historical prince Gautama Shakyamuni is regarded as but one of many historical embodiments of Buddha-consciousness; or in Hindu thought, where the incarnations of Vishnu are innumerable. The difficulty faced today by Christian thinkers in this regard follows from their doctrine of the Nazarene as the unique historical incarnation of God; and in Judaism, likewise, there is no less troublesome doctrine of a universal God whose eye is on but one Chosen People of all in His created world. The fruit of such ethnocentric historicism is poor spiritual fare today.[4]

What Campbell says here may be true for Hinduism and Buddhism, but it simply cannot explain or contain the force of Jesus and His gospel as historic, objective realities. There are at least three aspects of Campbell's analysis that, though they apply to myth, do not apply to Christianity.

First, Campbell argues that myths of gods who come to earth, die, and resurrect proceed from the psyche and thus are divorced from all historical reference. I disagree. The fact that ancient cultures have stories of incarnate gods who act as divine scapegoats offers, I suggest, strong proof that there is in mankind an innate desire for the divine Creator to take human form and dwell with them and that there is a universal feeling of guilt that necessitates divine intervention to expiate. Where do these desires and feelings originate? The psyche? The collective unconscious? The subconscious? If so, how did they find their way into those hidden recesses? The only explanation that can fully account for the existence of these universal, cross-cultural longings, I believe, is that it was the Creator Himself who put them there, and that they most often have found their expression in various cultural myths. If this is so, then it is not surprising that when God fulfills these universal longings through literal, historical events, those events resemble those cultural myths.

Second, Campbell claims that historical references are secondary, but if he means this to apply to Christianity (and he does), then he misses the whole point. What separates the incarnation stories of ancient Greece, Egypt, and India from those of Matthew or Luke is *precisely* that the biblical account is historical; it happened at a specific moment in time and space. Jesus' claims to deity are to be judged not by the mythic force they carry, but on the basis of whether Christ was raised bodily from the dead. Christ claimed to be God in human flesh, promised that His death on the cross would restore the sin-broken fellowship between God and man, and offered as surety of these claims the wonderful news that, on the third day, He would raise bodily from the grave. If Jesus was wrong in this, His most extravagant claim, then His reliability is thrown into question and Christianity becomes just one more (failed) attempt to achieve divine/human reconciliation. Paul thus admits, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). If, however, Jesus did rise (and it is a historical fact that the grave was empty on that first Easter morning[5]), then the truth of all He taught and did is established and confirmed, and our own salvation awaits only our humble acceptance of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Finally, Campbell claims that Christianity (like Judaism) is an ethnocentric and elitist religion. He is wrong. Central to the historical claims of Christianity is the belief that Christ died not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles as well, that the salvation He effected is open to *all* people, whatever their race, culture, or ethnicity. If Jesus is who He said He is (and that is really the only question that matters), then to say that Jesus is the only way to God is not elitist, it is merely common sense; for if we accept what Jesus taught and did, but we say He is not the only way to God, then we are saying that God sent His only-begotten Son to die a painful and humiliating death in order to offer us another option. The thought is not only ludicrous, it is ghastly.

Neither a culture nor a religion, neither a philosophy nor a myth, Christianity, like a living sword, shatters any sheath we try to put it in. It is as historically fixed as it is universally relevant, as real and personal as it is timeless and transcendent, as true today as it was yesterday and will be forever.

NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, rev. ed., ed. Hazard Adams (New York: HBJ, 1992), 1135–45.
2. All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
3. Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Bantam, 1972), 261.
4. Ibid., 261–62.
5. See Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004); William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994).