CHRISTIANITY – A BIRD’S-EYE VIEW

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In order to do any justice to one of the world’s large and widespread religious faiths in a brief presentation it is necessary to make some stark choices about what can be said and what must be left out. This is intended only as a very brief survey of some key points, including those that seem specific to this evening’s context. Whatever is left out or left in, someone is sure to be unhappy about it!

For a very long time many religious people of whatever faith, in some parts of the world, not least in this part of Europe, have had the relative comfort of being able to live within their traditions largely untouched by significant awareness of others who are different. But on those occasions when people’s conflicting claims of truth began to impinge on each other, then, sadly, all too often the religious flame became one of burning and destruction rather than one of warmth and light. In our contemporary global society, however, we can’t live with the illusion that everyone thinks – or should think – as we do. To borrow from John Donne, no faith is an island – our religions today exist in relationship, whether of harmony or discord; it is much harder now to hold to our beliefs and traditions without significant consciousness of those who believe and do things differently. In European experience Christianity has been a prominent, and – though I use the word with considerable caution – dominant presence for a millennium and more, but over the past few centuries it has also found a significant global place. Christianity is a world religion; it exists in relationship, comfortably or otherwise, with other world religions.

Despite its tendency towards a European appearance and image, Christianity emerged in the Middle East from the same ground as Judaism, Islam and the Bahá’í Faith – the first three of these, and probably all four, can justifiably be called the Abrahamic Faiths. If we are to understand Christianity it seems crucial to me to remember that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew – some would say a Jewish reformer. The Hebrew Scriptures – the Christian Old Testament – are common ground and are much quoted in the Christian New Testament. The early followers of Jesus were sure that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the anointed one – in Greek, Christos, the Christ – a title, not a surname. The Apostle Paul and other early Christian teachers and writers, not many years after the earthly life of Jesus, set the message of Jesus into a different, more open context. Now the Christian ‘good news’ – the Gospel – was being proclaimed not just to the original Jewish followers but also to Gentiles, and they joined the group of followers of the Christ in ultimately more dominant numbers. The separation from its appearance as a Jewish sect into a separate religion was encouraged by many in the early Church and was complete by the end of the first century of the Christian era. Sadly some of the New Testament passages which set out to emphasise the difference between the new Christian religion and its Jewish ancestor were used – and are sometimes still used – by later generations to promote anti-Jewish hatred.
It was the Roman Empire which provided the infrastructure to enable the young religion to expand into Europe and parts of Asia and North Africa, eventually developing its key ‘headquarters bases’ in Rome and Constantinople. In the fourth century of the Christian era the Empire itself was officially Christianised under the Emperor Constantine. Some might regard the adoption of Christianity as the imperial state religion as the end of authenticity, others as a ticket to future power and dominance. Power and dominance, however, may not be a good thing for any religion to acquire!

Geographical separation, differences in culture and practice and other long-simmering theological divisions led to a major split between the eastern and western Church in the 11th century of the Common Era (CE). The geographical, theological and cultural fault-line between these Christian traditions winds its way through the Balkans, foreshadowing later European political instability. The separated Eastern Orthodox traditions had much greater opportunity to experience the presence of the more recent and expanding Islamic faith; Christians in the Western Catholic Church remained much more immured from such contact, though not completely – Spain being the most significant exception. The other great division, the 16th century Reformation, resulted in a relatively monolithic but politically diverse Roman Catholic dominance of southern Europe and a more northerly Protestantism which appeared to have an inbuilt predisposition to splinter and splinter again. Over the past five centuries Protestant diversity has become vast, but within it can be found some prominent emphases: a sacramental focus within Lutheran and Anglican traditions; emphasis on ‘the Word’ in Reformed/Calvinist/Presbyterian traditions; focus on evangelism and personal faith commitment in Methodist, Baptist and other ‘non-conformist’ groups. In the development of Protestantism, however, these and other emphases have often overlapped and combined.

All three main branches of Christianity – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant – took the opportunity to expand westwards towards the New World and especially from the 18th and 19th centuries towards the east and the south, particularly through missionary expansion into the developing world, bringing it into new or increased contact with Islam and also with the religions of the Indian sub-continent and East Asia. Ironically it was the clash of those different forms of Christianity in the “mission fields” that gave initial impetus to the 20th century movement for Christian unity, the ecumenical movement. Initially an inter-Protestant movement, the ecumenical spirit always sought to include all branches of Christianity, and having somehow survived, and perhaps being stimulated by, two World Wars, came to some fruition after 1945, resulting in the establishment of the World Council of Churches and gradually involving Orthodox and Catholic Christians in ecumenical discussion and engagement. Relationships between the different branches of Christianity remain, at times and in certain places, difficult, even antagonistic, but elsewhere new understanding and trust have brought about inter-church co-operation and renewal, and even some minor reuniting of traditions.
For people living in Ireland Christianity is commonly perceived as either Catholic or Protestant, and the image around the world is frequently one of division and conflict. (Unfortunately public awareness of these divisions is frequently confused by the very loose use of the terminology of ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ which often indicates more about people’s sense of cultural identity and politics than about their religious beliefs and practices. Thus in Northern Ireland it is indeed possible to be ‘a Catholic or Protestant atheist’!) I have argued elsewhere, however, that the greater divisions between practising Christians in Northern Ireland seem to me to relate not to denominational identity but to the degree of openness or otherwise towards those of a different tradition. The tapestry of Christian beliefs in Northern Ireland is made up of the warp, the vertical and parallel denominational strands – Catholics, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists and so forth – and the often more significant weft, the horizontal strands which often cut right across denominational labels – the traditions of conservative evangelicalism and even fundamentalism, or of liberalism, or ecumenism, or differing approaches to liturgy, or attitudes to the role of women in ministry, and so on. When the warp and weft combine we get a more complete picture of the whole.¹ Despite the public image of Irish Christians in conflict there have been some striking examples of reconciliation, renewal and healing between Catholic and Protestant Christians in Northern Ireland, some of it well-known, much of it unheralded and unsung.

It is when we ask what is essential in Christian beliefs and practices that we encounter some of the most difficult tensions between different traditions. Christians, like many other faiths, are not uniform in orthodoxy or orthopraxy. As expressed through the great historic creeds, Christians traditionally affirm God as Creator and sustainer of life, and most teach that God is experienced in the three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All affirm the centrality of the life and teaching of Jesus, but while most traditions emphasise the death and resurrection of Jesus as the means towards salvation, some give as much or more weight to the example of Jesus and his message of love and service to others. Most Christians give emphasis to the centrality of the Bible – Old and New Testaments – as the source of authority for faith and practice, but some give significant weight also to tradition and the corporate teaching of the Church. Approaches to the Bible range from the very literal to a much more critical engagement with the texts, and some more radical thinkers have challenged many traditional theological tenets. Christian worship in some traditions is visually rich, sacramental, full of symbol and ritual, while in other traditions simplicity, extempore prayer or silence may be emphasized. Some Christians still use unaccompanied plainchant, many sing traditional and often ancient hymns, some sing contemporary songs complete with guitars, drums and movement, others sing only the Psalms of David, while others do not sing at all.

Throughout this diversity many ordinary Christians seek to live out their lives, observing the teachings and customs of their faith, some in situations of oppression and persecution, some struggling against institutionalized systems and formularies, some ministering to situations of great human need.

Many Christians have not yet engaged significantly with inter-faith relations, and this may well be one of the most important of future areas of learning. Yet when Christians quote the words of Jesus invoking love of God and of one’s neighbour, they might do well to recall that Jesus was quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures:

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\text{You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.} \]


The familiar call to work for justice and peace, and to care for the world we share, is common cause with all people of faith. As we take these faltering new steps of inter-faith co-operation perhaps we will understand more clearly the vision expressed by former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, that we may “learn to see the image of God in those who are not in our image”.

An earlier version of this talk was given in the Belfast Synagogue in January 2004 as one of three 10 minutes talks designed to offer an introduction to the Abrahamic Faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

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