

Retelling the Story –The Other Jesus

There are two stories in what I want to say to you: the story of Jesus who has been a guide and model for me in the course of a long life, and the personal story of the progressive rejection of much of what the Church has taught about my model human. We have a choice between Jesuses . On the one hand there is the fairy-story baby, planted by a miracle in his mother's womb, who grew up never making a mistake, never doing a wrong thing or thinking a wrong thought, immaculate like his mother, (and her mother according to the Pope), remote from the common trials of our lives, endowed with supernatural knowledge gained without effort, who performed remarkable acts by virtue of divine powers, died a symbolic death and went to heaven. On the other hand there is the man, planted in his mother's womb by traumatic physical intercourse, moulded and shaped by society as we all are, suffering more than most of us, and, as a consequence of the difficulties he faced, making discoveries about life and God which he wished so intensely to share with us that he was willing to die to pass them on. I found most of the background to the "real" Jesus story in John Spong's book, *Born of a Woman* and *The Christmas Stories* by William Loader (ch. 6). Much of my own pilgrimage has appeared on the Sofnet over the past ten years¹ and I want to acknowledge the debt I owe to the Sea of Faith movement for the stimulus and encouragement to press on.

There is a third story to which Keith Lightfoot referred me in Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception & Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* in which Jesus is the natural son of Joseph, born within wedlock and raised normally in Joseph's family. Barbara Thiering in *Jesus the Man* has a variant of this, complicated by strange sectarian rites. This third alternative makes Matthew, who asserts that Joseph had no intercourse with Mary until after the birth, a deliberate liar, it fails to account for the differences between Jesus and his siblings and it contradicts several small but significant details of the Gospel story. I am leaving this one aside for the moment.

This paper could well be entitled "Kicking Against the Pricks". The general consensus is that the Gospel stories , being written so long after the death of Jesus are no longer historical accounts, if they ever were, but have been so massaged to fit perceptions about him current two generations later that it is impossible to recreate a historical Jesus. My response is twofold. However much the acts and sayings of Jesus have been selected, collated and edited to fit predetermined purposes, they are based on memories and contain vignettes of lived experiences which survive the modifications of the narrative. In the right context they can illuminate the text by confirming hypotheses. There are three of these in my story. And the second part of my reply is that this is the story of a lifetime search to understand Jesus and what I have found has transformed the significance of his life and death for me. Hopefully it may do something similar for you too.

Fairy story versus birth-pains and donkey-dung.

Why did Joseph, a caring and a just man according to the bible, take a heavily pregnant wife on a difficult five-day journey to Bethlehem to fill out a tax form? The tax system of those days did not have the rigour of the IRD – 7th of July or else. Why not wait a week or two or leave earlier? There

¹ See particularly <http://sof.wellington.net.nz/doclist.htm#PAPER>

was perhaps a good reason to leave when they did and to stay a while in the South before returning to Nazareth. Some of you are old enough to remember the rich girls of our youth going off to Sydney to drop an unwelcome baby or the poor girls disappearing into Salvation Army homes where they gave birth but never saw the child. “Better for both if no bonding occurs.” We won’t speak of knitting needles in back streets. If the social stigma of an illegitimate birth produced such monstrous treatment in our society, how much worse was it in Israel where a married or betrothed woman – Mary’s case – who committed adultery was stoned to death? (Deut.22:24) What would have become of Mary if Joseph had “dismissed her quietly” (Matt 1:19) as he planned? The pair had good reason to be out of Nazareth when the baby arrived and to stay away a while after the birth. Three months spent with Elizabeth as the signs of the pregnancy became visible, going away for the actual birth and staying away for a time afterwards, it is remarkable how well the biblical narratives fit with the precautions a couple in Mary and Joseph’s position would take to avoid or mitigate local gossip. Yet we are told they probably never left Nazareth! To be born in Herod’s time the birth would be prior to BCE 4; to correspond with the census of Quirinius it would have to be in CE 7. But it makes no difference whether Jesus was born in Bethlehem or Nazareth in either year..

Jesus illegitimate

The fact is that in the eyes of his contemporaries and their parents’ generation, Jesus was illegitimate. There is a fragile tissue of evidence both direct and indirect that this was so. In the first place Jesus himself told us: When his parents set out for home after their visit to Jerusalem, he stayed behind, enthralled by the environment of the temple and engaged with the elders there. Mary reproached him “My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been looking for you”. He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:49). Look at the structure of the reproach: “Your father (Joseph) and I were worried.; and the reply...”my Father’s business” (no mention of Joseph). What was this if not a touchy teenage response to his parents’ criticism, flung as a reproach in his mother’s teeth. (As an aside Jesus’ attitude to Mary, and his family’s attitude to him raise their own questions but they are another story.)

The second major source in the gospels is John 8 in a context where the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus. They bring to him a woman caught in adultery. Their point is obvious. If he condemns the woman he condemns his mother, if he excuses her, out of sympathy with his mother’s situation, he advocates breaking the law. He avoids the trap by shaming the crowd and refuses to pass judgement on the woman. His enemies then challenge him to identify himself. A long passage on the relationship between him and his father, clearly God, not Joseph, follows. In the course of it and in response to an accusation by Jesus, his tormentors replied “We were not born illegitimate,” the implication being that Jesus was. I find this chapter difficult, not the least because if Jesus said the things that are attributed to him there, his enemies would have every reason to accuse him of blasphemy and kill him. Yet it was only the closing statement “In all truth I tell you, before Abraham was, I am” that stirred them into action. (Cf Lk 4:23 ff)

The Gospel of John was the last to be written and it is accused by modern Jews of being a polemic against them. But there were also polemics against Christians on the Jewish side too at that time, witness the *Toledot Jeschu*; to discredit Christianity, the story was circulated that Mary was raped by a Roman soldier, Joseph Pandera. Whatever the truth of the allegation, the situation remains that Mary’s husband, Joseph, did not father Jesus (Matt.1:25). Who did? We have a choice between AIG (Assisted Insemination by God) or a normal human coupling with a man. In favour of the latter is

- the absence in Paul of any supernatural implication to do with the birth as Spong (op. cit) points out and Mark’s silence on the birth. Note that Mark refers to Jesus as “son of Mary”.
- The rejection of the virgin birth by the Ebionites. a sect of the neo-Christian church.

- Even the fairy story of angels, shepherds and wise men on camels discredits itself by the obvious motivation for inventing it. People who loved and respected Jesus and Mary provided them with less shameful circumstances than those which actually occurred. There are also political reasons for alleging a divine birth as Marcus Borg suggests (*The Heart of Christianity*).

The conception of a child out of wedlock does not necessarily imply a shadow of immorality on Mary's part; indeed if Mary had not been entirely innocent it is unlikely that Joseph would have stood by her. If she had been a willing participant in adultery she would have been stoned. The fact that she was not speaks strongly for rape. A girl raped in the countryside must not be punished (Deut.22: 26-27).

For me the weight of probabilities is that Mary was raped, but the revised story is not without its miracles. The first is that out of the millions of sperm involved, the one entered Mary's ovum which produced that remarkable man, Jesus – a one in twelve million chance (see later "coincidence"); the second is that out of such a wrongful act such a wonderful blessing grew, within the envelope of the divine; the third miracle is that Joseph, a man of his time and faced with the immense social prejudice against illegitimacy, was nevertheless willing not only to accept Mary but to legitimize her son.

What is the effect of his illegitimacy on the growing child?

John Spong describes how Luke and Matthew created a midrash out of the birth-story, fitting it into the context of the prophecies, a detail from here, a detail from there, to create a story which in their eyes attributed a true significance to the event of his birth. Let us make a midrash, fitting what the bible tells us into a context we understand, by using our experience of the comparable social pressures which were brought to bear on child and parents in the intolerance of the last century.

The Man of Sorrows is prefigured by the Child of Sorrows. Tchaikovsky's "Crown of Roses" catches the point exactly. When the child Jesus played with the other children, would the gossip exchanged between their parents not find its expression in the jibes of his companions? "Who's your father? Who's your father?" What would Mary reply to the brilliant, sensitive, unhappy child's perplexed question "Who is my father?" "Why, God is father to us all, God is your father". So the unhappy little child called out to the universe and the universe answered him. Is this experience not reflected in Jesus' teaching about the kingdom? "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. In truth I tell you, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Mk 10:14 – 16, see also Matt. 18: 1-4). The close communion between human and divine which Jesus discovered depends on an attitude like the naïve trust of a little child. We will come back to that point. So the brilliant, sensitive child grew up in close communion with the divine, a father who solaced him in the jibes of his contemporaries by the special relationship he enjoyed, and which nourished his body and mind. As he grew it became the central focus of his life. The law of Moses became his father's law, to be studied diligently and later applied as the loving father that he knew would want it applied, for the benefit of human beings, not to limit and condemn them; outcast himself, yet loved by God, outcasts became his father's people – lepers, the despised, tax-gatherers and prostitutes; the poor, looked down upon by the socially secure, were loved by God as he was (the beatitudes), while those who sat in social judgment on him and others were condemned (Matt. 23, Lk 21:1-4). God's fatherhood set the world to rights, correcting injustice, restoring the traditional virtues of compassion and generosity, redirecting grand visions of conquest and status down to individual people and their needs. The gospels are not about the liberation of the Holy Land from Roman domination or the completion of the temple. In modern terms Jesus was not concerned with visions of New Zion or democracy in Gaza, but with the Palestinian child kept from his school by a Jewish

roadblock, the Palestinian farmer whose olive grove is ploughed up to make way for an Israeli road, the family torn apart by a suicide bomber.

The adverse circumstances of his life liberated him from society and its conventions and from his family and its obligations, releasing in him progressively quite remarkable gifts, which are inhibited in us by the pressure to conformity. He discovered a different mode of life and source of power and was imbued with the mission to pass this new discovery on to others, his own and God's people first and then all humanity. The roots of the concept of God's fatherhood may well lie in Amos and Hosea, but Jesus' experience of it brought the reality down to the level of daily bread and personal acquaintance – one's neighbour even if he or she was a foreigner (the Good Samaritan Lk10:29-37). His God-given mission was to pass this new truth on to others; he wept over the obduracy of Jerusalem but pursued his mission right to the last despairing cry on the cross – "Eloi. Eloi. lama sabac'thani."

It was too much for his contemporaries. This leap in the concept of God as a loving father was too great for them, particularly Paul, who reinstated the Temple construct of propitiation and intercession by the High Priest on behalf of the people. Essentially, the Church by establishing Jesus as intercessor, and later Mary and the Saints, cut right across the immediacy of the loving father which Jesus died to proclaim

What does Jesus' illegitimacy mean to us?

There are two principal consequences: implications for incarnation and the divine voice.

- **Incarnation:**

There is no question but that Jesus and his friends transformed the world and shaped the course of history. He was no ordinary person. He is a model for a human life for almost everybody, whether Christian or Muslim or Buddhist, or humanist or even atheist, once the religious baggage he brings with him is dropped. The question is "How exclusive is the model?"

If he was conceived, born and shaped by society as we are, how was he unique? How are we different from him? It is clear from the gospels that in Jesus' mind a special relationship existed between himself and God, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me. (Jn 14:11), a relationship which he could pass on to those he chose, but which was not available without his intervention. The text of John 14 is explicit that the Jesus presented there could confer privileges on his disciples. "I am going now to prepare a place for you..."(Jn 14:2) ; "Whatever you ask for in my name I will do" (Jn 14:13).

So was Jesus the Son of God by special appointment as it were, or was this unique relationship only in his own mind – a metaphor or a delusion? Was he divinely selected by that union of sperm and ovum to be what he became? Did he become the incarnation of the divine by predisposition to that end, a preconditioned dedication to "his father's will", or was that belief conditioned in him by the context of his birth and growth, with the help of a mother, accepting what she felt to be divine direction and a foster-father equally obedient to the divine voice? Did he make a free choice of his mission or was it imposed on him? We have here the same dilemma which is presented by the assertion "I am the way, the truth and the light. No one comes to the Father except by me" (Jn 14:6) with all the paraphernalia that the Christian Church brings with it. Do Christians have an exclusive right to the divine grace? Buddhists, Bahai, Muslims, Wiccans, humanists and atheists can get lost? Or was Jesus enunciating a general principle. "Follow my example and you will find the same relationship with the divine as I have found"? This is an important question for 21st century believers.

- **Are we, like Jesus, God incarnate?**

But there is another question from which all Christology ultimately depends: If Jesus was God incarnate and Jesus was a human being like us, then are we not, potentially, God incarnate too? The priest when he is ordained is reminded “God has no other hands but yours.” Is this not true for us all? The actions of human beings are the operation of the divine on earth. Christianity became the force in the world that it has been, not uniquely by Jesus, but by the willingness of those about him to do what they felt was right; by his parents and by his disciples, particularly Paul. The moment of history into which he and they fell was apt for such a group to become world-shattering. According to chaos theory, given the right circumstances, the stroke of a butterfly’s wing in Mexico can set off a train of events that leads to a hurricane in Brazil. Do we, by doing what we believe to be right, not have the same potential as Jesus and his group to transform the world when the circumstances are right? The excuse that we are only human, whereas he was divine. disappears along with his divine privileges if he was conceived like us, grew like us, was shaped by his society like us and made his own free choices. We cannot shelter our underachievement by the excuse that we are not divinely planted, but must face the fact that we lack the necessary devotion. He promised us his own achievements: “In all truth I tell you, whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself, and will perform even greater works, because I am going to the Father.” Jn 14:12.

There are not many in the Sea of Faith who would accept the notion of an interventionist God. How then might these “greater works” be achieved without miraculous intervention? We will come to that question in the last section of this study.

- **Talking to God**

The nature of incarnation was the first question which the illegitimacy of Jesus poses for us. The other is the intimate relationship he had with his Father/Universe. “I and my Father are one”.

Is conversation with the divine a tenable notion for us? This question marks the crux between Noel Cheer and me and I regret that the organisation of this conference precludes debate between us on it. The Jesus Seminar weighs the statements of Jesus and concludes that this one was authentic and that one was not. But whatever their conclusions, the thing which cannot be denied is that Jesus “talked” to God. In this he was not unique. Indeed over the whole of history, across most religions, particularly the Judeo-Christian-Muslim group, communion with the divine is a commonplace of religious experience. Rationalists may scoff at the notion or explain it psychologically but the whole history of humanity from the Garden of Eden until now witnesses against them. If we want to be the incarnation of the divine as Jesus was, we must talk to the Universe as he did.

I/Thou

Buber is helpful here. He describes two sorts of discourse – conversation and description. In a description the person or object is appraised: such and such a tree develops from a seed, reaches maturity in x years, grows to an average of y metres, bears flowers and edible fruit after z years, is deciduous and so on. People can be described comparably and these characterisations can be compared with the appraisals of others. The scientific method is an application of this type of discourse with rules to ensure that rigorous comparisons can be made (falsifiability).

On the other hand, the *I/thou* discourse assumes the presence and empathy of the other without regard to their nature. When one hugs a tree or talks to a tomato plant the assumption is that the action is valid and efficaciously directed to the living essence of the plant without raising questions about its intrinsic nature. So it is with the universe. The child Jesus cried out to his father and was answered. If we wish to follow the path Jesus opened for us, to do the things he did “and greater than these” we must at first adopt the naïve trust of a little child, the *I/thou* form of discourse,

which does not define the other but opens in empathy to it. The result is transformation, like the Pentecost experience of the disciples, liberating capacities within ourselves which otherwise remain inhibited and aligning our actions with consequences for good which we cannot predict. The critical and analytical attitude of the Humanist or your average SoFtie automatically excludes this communion with the divine and precludes the evolutionary leap towards the New Humanity which is our destiny.

As Jesus was, so we are. Do we lessen his importance by seeing ourselves as sharing his incarnation? No, because that is the nature of the divine; it is already part of us as we are part of the universe. Jesus invited that view and Paul confirmed it calling us “sons by adoption” (Gal. 4:5) and “co-heirs of the kingdom”(Rom 8:14-17). The creeds are wrong in speaking of Jesus as “the only son” and more wrong still in attributing his begetting to God. But if he is to be our model, if we are to “do these things and more than these” then we need his total dedication and his unimpeded communication with “Our Father, which art in heaven”.

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WORKSHOP SECTION

The story of a Jesus born from a wrongful act, forged by social discrimination, guided into a new communion with God/nature/the universe by the envelope of love and tradition in which he was raised and leaving us his discovery of a new way of being, has a fan of implications for us, each of which is a paper, a seminar, a book in itself. I've listed some of these topics and made brief notes on them.

- **Is God a person?**
- **Is God other ?** – the essential communion, with God, with each other, with the natural world
- **God and Darwinian evolution** – intervention vs coincidence, the directed pawn
- **The conventional beliefs** – sin, forgiveness and salvation, the kingdom of heaven.
- **Christianity and other religions;**

Is God a person?

What is His/Her name? Is it Andy as the joke would have it? Andy walks with me, Andy talks with me, Andy tells me I am his own? Since Adam ate the apple, humankind has been casting God in its own image – angry god, merciful god, generous god, vindictive god, patient god, male god, female god. God is at least the universe. How absurd to categorize the universe in such petty terms! And to cast divinity in the exclusive mould of Jesus only perpetuates the absurdity (cf the Trinity).

Is God other?

Jesus said “I and my Father are one”. Was he then talking to himself in the garden of Gethsemane “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by”. Or how are we to read the desperately personal “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1), strung out in agony between doubt and faith? Does the answer to this paradox lie in Jesus’ discovery that he was so conformed to the stuff of the universe, which he had always identified as “Daddy” (*Abba*), that his life was an extension of the divine, his actions were God’s actions. How could his friends possibly conceive of such a notion? The only way he might pass this concept on was by claiming identity between himself and the divine. “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father”.

- **Divinity is inherent in every particle of the universe.**

The I/thou relationship does not require the definition of the interlocutor; is the child fastened to the mother’s breast aware of the mother’s characteristics? To enter the kingdom of heaven requires us similarly to be fastened to the divine teat (Blessed are those that hunger and thirst after righteousness) until we are experienced enough to be weaned i.e. to find God in each other and in nature and build harmonious relationships on all planes about us. As the infant on the teat is an affective extension of the mother so we are an affective extension of the divine. Was the conversation between Jesus and his father not effectively the part communicating with the whole? As he was, so we are. Are we not then integral parts of the universe, called also to communicate with our whole? The part calls to the whole, the whole yearns for contact with the part. We call that in-built yearning religion and its function in the universal scheme of things is clear. There is an affinity between all things in the universe within our ken from the atoms in the molecule to the galaxies in space, awesome and self-regulating in every aspect but one, the human species, which, because of the autonomy given to it by our awareness, needs a regulating principle, call it love – the human application of the universal affinity – and guidance in its application.

- **The special position of humankind in the scheme of creation.**

Teilhard de Chardin in his mind-changing book *Le Phénomène Humain* makes the point that, unique among the creatures of the earth, we are capable not only of perceiving the processes of evolution but of affecting them for better or for worse; we are in a measure co-creators in the great dance of God's becoming.

The universe will go on evolving whatever we do. The ancients had a saying "Ducunt volentes, nolentes trahunt Fata", the Fates lead on the willing and drag along the unwilling, which seems still to apply and sets a limit on the damage we can do in our little sphere. And it is true that the future holds some sharp reprimands for our mismanagement, through ignorance and greed, of the earth's resources put in our care.

In the natural order all components fit by their inherent nature; for animals that means by instinct. By becoming rational beings we are required to consent to the natural order, which we can refuse, or modify through the processes generated by evolution itself – the development of human awareness. If we are to exercise that freedom responsibly it requires the same close communication between the universe and humanity which Jesus, in the footsteps of the prophets, pioneered. This is the source of "religion", that mutual yearning of the part and the whole for each other.

God and Darwinian evolution – intervention vs coincidence, the directed pawn

Is God still creating the world? Or does our evolution hang on pure chance? Is the universe self-determining to a predestined end (Teilhard and the omega point)? Does God intervene now by the exercise of divine power i.e. by miracles, and will he intervene in the future to close down the shop? The more we know about evolution, the less likely direct divine intervention in the present appears, and the more likely it seems that the end of humanity, if it occurs, will be caused by natural events, either the consequence of human actions, or out of the blue, like a meteor strike, or, if we last that long, when the sun becomes a red giant and roasts us all. Direct intervention by God on the apocalyptic model seems implausible. If we wish to believe that evolution is a part of the divine becoming, then we need to find a theory which allows participation by the divine within the compass of natural law and particularly natural selection.

I am told that some time ago London was dirty with smoke and grime. Then it was cleaned. The change was signalled by London moths; before the wall-washers got to work the prevalent moth colour was dark brown or black; a year after the cleansing the predominant colour was white. Did the moths, like the chameleon change their skin to match their background? No. On the black walls white moths got eaten; whereas on the white walls it was black moths that got picked off. The environment selected those fittest to survive. In the whole natural world natural selection brings about the survival of the fittest, a game played between the predator and the prey, weeding out the weak and ill-adapted, ensuring change as environments change, and spicing the mix by random mutations which inject surprises into the system, to be tested in their turn. This wonderful process of renewal by selection and random mutation is demonstrated beyond doubt. It is built on affinities, balancing populations with food supplies, eliminating genetic errors, adapting to changing circumstances. In its automatic application is it at variance with the notion of a self-determining universe?

Scientists tell us that the universe itself, the planetary systems within it and life on this planet all depend on very fine ratios between the components, the result of sequences of coincidences which attest an organising, or self-organising principle. Whatever the truth of that, with the coming of humanity there is an obvious mechanism for the active participation of the divine in evolution. Take the story of Jesus as an example. The sperm that penetrated Mary's ovum may have benefited from a divine nudge, the sort of guided coincidence that seems to have occurred in the foundation of the universe, but from then on it was Mary's response to the divine word that fostered the foetus,

Joseph's response that accepted Jesus, the apostles' response to his charisma that supported his mission, Paul's missionary zeal that placed it at the heart of the Roman empire and Thomas's that took it to the ends of the earth. Like the stroke of the butterfly's wing in Mexico producing a hurricane in Brazil, the willingness of people to listen to the divine voice created a complex string of coincidences which transformed the world. Even human evil, the rape, is taken into the mix and turned to good. Without it where would Jesus be? The divine moves willing pieces into circumstances where coincidences occur. As Jesus was, so we are. "God has no hands but ours" and it is on us that the future of God-in-humanity depends in this world.

The conventional beliefs – sin, forgiveness and salvation, the kingdom of heaven.

Here is a faith built on the belief that Jesus was one of us and was for us the example of the divine inherent in us all and calling for communication between the part and the whole. How does it fit within the traditional dogmas of the Church?

The misunderstandings of the fathers and the elaborate structures of belief built on them will have to go. Jesus – only son of god and sole repository of divinity, Great High Priest of the line of Melchizadek, mediator between human and God, second person of the Trinity, these sabotage the significance of his love and sacrifice and deny his discovery of the true nature of the divine. With them disappear the pernicious doctrines of propitiation and the vindictive last judgement which deform the metaphor of God as a loving father. Those excisions from the list remove the exclusiveness of Christian belief and make a place for other charismatic figures who also listen to the promptings of the universe – Socrates, the Buddha, Mahomet, Bahauulla, Mandela and other modern saints.

But many other doctrines, redefined, will stand as beneficial.

- **Salvation**

If defined in the present as the state of being in the kingdom of heaven and for the future that state towards which humankind is evolving, where our father's will is done on earth as in heaven, the term is valid and helpful. In other terms humankind is evolving from an animal/instinctual condition into *homo spiritualis* of which Jesus is the exemplar. We are being *saved* from the animal condition and led into the garden of grace intended for humanity.

- **Resurrection**

I do not have the knowledge to comment on the physical resurrection of Jesus . As he was, so we are, and any explanation should show that in certain situations resurrection is a possibility for us all (Cf J B.Phillips and the apparition of C.S.Lewis). I can envisage how that might come about but it is only speculation. There are however other solid grounds for holding to the notion of resurrection. Every time we recall Jesus to mind, particularly when we share a meal together and say grace (and I include the common meal at the eucharist) we resurrect him in our hearts. The same resurrection is open to us also and depends on the mark we have made on the lives that follow ours. The Maori recital of *whakapapa* regularly restores the *tūpuna* to life.

- **Sin, redemption and forgiveness**

The story of human evolution is one of steady ascent into ever widening neighbourly relations. The myth of the fall, of hereditary sinfulness ("In sin did my mother conceive me" Ps 51:5) and guilt at simply existing are pernicious and destructive notions and belong in the trash can.

Unique to humanity is the capacity to envisage the perfect, the ideal. Measured against it, the actual always falls short – *hamartia*. I have argued elsewhere that a sense of sin (of falling short) is the driving force of human evolution².

This notwithstanding, in a belief system in which the communication of the part with the whole is the primary concern, what impairs that communication is sin: – judgemental attitudes,, deep-seated prejudice, a wrong done to another, a life ruined by addiction and so on. Original sin excepted, the tenets of traditional dogma are pretty well identical. Forgiveness is an essential component in rehabilitation and in some cases the notion of redemption is helpful. Transformation is a feature of the religious world; repentance, confession and forgiveness are mechanisms for bringing it about and the lack of a mechanism for it within the Sea of Faith is a major flaw of the movement.

- **The Kingdom of Heaven**

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.’ (Matt.6:25-34)

Is the Kingdom of Heaven a place? Do we go to it when we die? The gazelles on the African plains graze contentedly in the presence of lions. Come evening the lions stir, the gazelles prepare for flight, there is a charge, a kill is made and the gazelles go on grazing contentedly. This is the instinctual life of the animal, pursuing a timeless existence between life and death. The garden of Eden. A continuous present. Humanity’s eating of the apple – our awareness of past and future – put an end to that. Being able to envisage the future and measure it against the past, we worry. Jesus’ answer – Find the link with the universe, actively engage in collaboration with it, give to it the trust of a little child, and the peace which passes all understanding will be yours. The kingdom of heaven is here and now, not a return to the instinctual life from which we evolved, but a recapturing of it, enriched by the fullness of our human awareness, consecrated to the service of the divine. If there is life after death, then this will be the mode of it.

Christianity and other religions

How does this new understanding of incarnation, available to all who wish to adopt it, affect the relationship between religions, and sectarian differences within them? From the Christian point of view the brutal conflict between Sunni and Shia, based on an event 1000 years old is irrational not to say stupid. How does the equally bitter and destructive conflict between Roman Catholic and

² <http://sof.wellington.net.nz/doclist.htm#PAPER> “In the Beginning, Sin”

Reformer in the 16th Century look to Islam, or the murderous conflict in Dafur or in the Balkans look to the whole world outside the warring factions? One might reflect that the wholesale slaughter and, more significantly, the rape and infection of thousands of women which will impair their breeding ability, serves the natural order by reducing overpopulation. But the compassion, which expresses the set of the universe for the affinity of everything, condemns all such brutal enterprises.

In the natural world the universe harbours an infinite diversity of genera and species beyond our comprehension. Why should the religious world not also harbour many responses to the divine imperative – Love each other? But while each group regards themselves as the holders of the unique truth and even claims exclusive possession of God godself, that is a patent impossibility. Let each figurehead be a wonderful human, the exemplar of the divine in human form, let each of us love our man or woman and worship the divine through and in him or her and be happy to see the love of others for their divine hero. That is the model the natural world has given us. But until our heroes are unseated from their unique thrones Israel will persecute Muslim, Islam will persecute Bahai and Hindu and the Global South will walk out of the Anglican communion. Is this the harmony that the divine is seeking from us? Jesus said “anyone who is not against you is for you” (Lk 9:50 see also 1 Cor. 1:1–15) where Paul condemns factionalism.

Practice

There are characteristics which most religions share; they contain a large proportion of people of good will, whether they believe the creed of their birth religion or not, whether they practise the rites or not, who nevertheless feed the hungry, heal the sick, clothe the naked and work for justice and peace. There are many whose urge for spirituality is satisfied by music or the wonder of a sunset and whose life is lived under moral principles. There are others who share actively in the communion of a congregation, loving and supporting each other and the missionary endeavours of the group. From time to time leaders emerge to advance the understanding of God another step; the history of religion is studded with them from the Hebrew prophets to Gandhi and Mandela. From eon to eon when a human is in perfect accord with the divine and the circumstances concur, a superhero of the Faith emerges to lead and to inspire. All these groups, from spiritually minded atheist to superhero, collaborate according to their lights in the great becoming of the universe. Is this not the clear lesson of the history of religion and should we not take it into account in our dealings with other sects and other religions? Despite the enormous edifices of doctrine which humans erect around their superheroes universal religion is really quite simple – Love each other, judge not, trust God. The only imperative is communication between the individual human and the universe, the part and the whole. If the human requires a rite or a personification to enable that link then the universe is very broad-minded; it matters not whether the focus figure is the Virgin Mary or the neighbour’s cat, until the mediate figure becomes not a means but an end in itself, blocking the flow. The ultimate end of human evolution is when we all willingly and gladly become clear channels of the divine grace. Then the Kingdom of God will have come on earth as in heaven. Or to put it another way, humankind will have transcended our animal roots and attained the next step in our evolutionary journey, following our leading shoot, Jesus.

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