

BASIC CHRISTIANITY

Lecture Number 1

REALITY AND RELIGION

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INTRODUCTION

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Everybody has trouble—

With his neighbor: “What did you mean by that?”.... “Why weren’t you here when I needed you?”“Where is the money you owe me?”“I hate you.”.... “You snore!” and –

With things: “I’m hungry.”.... “Gosh, it’s hot!”.... “These shoes are killing me.”... “The battery in my car is dead.” and –

With himself: “I’m afraid.”.... “Why did I do that?”.... “I forgot.”.... “I don’t want to die.”

Everyone has trouble with reality—with all of reality, including whatever he considers to be the basic reality.

The common human experience is that there is disorder, pain, suffering, and confusion. And every religion that ever existed in one way or another attempts to deal with that fact and to make sense of our experience.

Different religions have given different names to the universal human problem; but they are all talking about the same situation, though perhaps expressed in different terms. Buddhism, for example, takes its starting point from the statement: “There is suffering.” And Christianity talks about “Original Sin”.

RELIGION

Since everyone in the world has these same basic problems, everyone in the world has some kind of religion – because: *Religion is any system of belief and practice aimed at restoring one to harmony or unity with reality.* The very word “religion” comes from two Latin terms: *re* (again) and *ligare* (to tie); thus, “religion” means “that which ties back together again”. But note:

- Not everyone’s religion is connected with his church-going.
 1. Some who go to church regularly are actually trusting in something else to solve the basic problem(s) of life: perhaps science, wealth or power, etc.
 2. Some people’s religion really is their church.
 3. Some have no church at all in the usual sense; but they still have religion ... of some kind.

“All God’s chillun got religion.”

- The discrepancy between one's real religion and his church practice is simply another example of the universal human condition of dislocation and alienation.
- A person's real religion is whatever he is trusting in to do the job of restoring unity and meaning to his life, and to put him at peace with his experience of reality. So . . .

REALITY

The kind of religion you have depends upon the assumptions you make about reality. And there are really only three basic notions of what reality is:

The most common notion is that whatever you can see, touch, hear, taste, or smell is real. This is called *Materialism*.

MATERIALISM

But this kind of reality, material reality, is never permanent; it is always changing, wearing out, running down, rusting, drying out, disintegrating, changing into something else.

In the middle of a fine neighborhood, where all the houses were built about the same time, around the turn of the century, there stands one which has been vacant for fifty years. It is terribly dilapidated, and the children say it is haunted.

The pyramids of Egypt were once plated with polished marble. But now all that is left are the huge steps of rough stone.

Thousands of great movies, by actors like Will Rogers and others, have all perished, because the nitrate film on which they used to be printed has disintegrated.

When you stop to reflect on the fact of universal impermanence, you are likely to get depressed and to fall into the mood of the writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, who said: "All is vanity."

Especially after periods of great upheaval or rapid social change, people look around for that which seems to be dependable. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of such turmoil. And many people were intoxicated with the idea of getting rid of all the old institutions which no longer seemed "relevant." But now the mood has changed dramatically, and today people are looking for something to hold on to.

IDEALISM

Thus in the 4th century B.C. Plato was looking for that which is permanent, abiding. And he said something like this: "Little green apples grow up into mature red apples; then they fall off the tree, and finally they decay and are gone. The next year the same thing happens all over again. Apples evidently do not abide. But there is something about them that does abide— 'apple-ness', or the *idea* of apple-ness."

Thus there is a kind of reality which does not depend on the physical world: 2 plus 2 equals 4, whether there is anything to have 2 plus 2 of, or not (as, in fact, Pythagoras had observed before

Plato).

According to Plato, then, the *ideas* form a hierarchy: at the top there is God and under him, the Good, the True, the Beautiful, and down at the bottom there are the *ideas* of specific things such as apples. The specific things of this world are not real, but are only reflections of what is truly real: the *idea*.

Plato's approach to reality is thus called *Idealism*. (It is not to be confused with the more common use of the word which refers to "having high ideals".)

REALISM

Plato the philosopher had a number of students. One of them, named Aristotle, responded that when you are hungry you want an apple, not just the idea of an apple or appleness. So Aristotle said that reality involved the union of the idea with matter. Reality, he said, is to be found in the thing [Latin: *res*, thing] which expressed or conveyed the idea. Thus, his notion is called *Realism*.

To illustrate: If I have a radio which stops working, and I take it apart in the hope of finding out how to fix it, what I then have is not really a radio, but a basket-case—even though I may have bought a new part to replace the bad one. I need something else. I need someone who understands radio and who can put it back together right.

This "together rightness" is called the *form*. The stuff it is made of is called the *matter*. Reality, according to Aristotle, is the union of form and matter. In other words, a house is not just a set of blueprints; nor is a house just a pile of lumber, nails, paint and so on. It is these materials put together right, in the form, supplied by the blueprints. In other words, it is the *marriage of pattern and matter*. [Greek: *pater*, father; *mater*, mother]

As we analyze anything in the universe, we discover at every step that it is form—or pattern—plus stuff. At the lowest level, the atomic level, it is pattern plus the stuff of energy; or, rather, it is energy in pattern. The pattern is dynamic, moving. But it is still pattern—in fact, dance.

DOGMA

Everyone's life-style is based on the assumption that one or other of these three notions of reality—Materialism, Idealism, Realism—or perhaps some combination of them, is true. This assumption is simply taken for granted most of the time.

It can be very difficult to question your own basic assumptions. Such unquestioned assumptions by which we live are, psychologically, *dogmas*. Your basic frame of reference is your dogma. For example:

Johnny asks his mother: "Why does water run downhill?"

Mother: "Because of the Law of Gravity."

Johnny: "What's the Law of Gravity?"

Mother: "The fact that water runs downhill."

Johnny: "Yes, Mother, but why?"

Mother: "Well, Honey, it just does."

That “water runs downhill” is Mother’s dogma.

Dogmas cannot be explained. They are what you explain other things by.

Dogmas are taken for granted: “Everyone knows that ...”

Dogmas are not negotiable: they are what you live by -- and it can be very threatening to have your dogmas called into question.

Doctrines, on the other hand, are not at all the same things as dogmas. Doctrines can be explained, and they are negotiable.

There is, by the way, an alternative to the Mother’s dogma in the above example. When Johnny asked why water runs downhill, Mother could have said: “Because God tells it to.”

Dogmas are what you bet your life on. Because everyone has dogmas, everyone bets his life day in and day out.

EXPLANATION

An *explanation* is the translation of an experience or an idea, which is puzzling or causes anxiety, into familiar terms in which it can be understood and the anxiety removed.

To illustrate: In 1960, a Japanese soldier is discovered in the jungles of New Guinea. He has been hiding out for 15 years, not knowing that the war is over. When he gets back to Japan, he sees television for the first time. They explain to him that the picture is transmitted using the principles of radio—and that satisfies him.

But a bushman from New Guinea, when he sees television for the first time, thinks it is magic. There is no way to explain it to him, because he has no experience in terms of which he can understand it.

So the basic purpose of these classes is not to explain Christianity. Christianity is not the problem. The problem is human life; and Christianity is itself the explanation.

The purpose of these classes is to describe Christianity and its dogmas. There may be some explanations along the way—but that is not the basic purpose. What we will be doing is examining life and its problems in terms of the Christian religion.

Many people, who think they know what the Christian religion is and what it has to say about life, in fact do not—because their dogmas are not Christian dogmas. Such people learned their dogmas from the world.

When someone whose dogmas are not Christian reads or hears the words of Holy Scripture, he does not really hear what the writer said or reported. St. Paul had this problem in mind when he wrote (in his Letter to the Romans): “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind ... ” [Romans 12:2].

AWE

Life is awful. That is to say: the more deeply we reflect upon the human experience, the more we are moved to *awe*. This is just as true of the good things in life as of the bad.

Definition: *Awe is a mixture of fear and fascination* -- as when a man, crossing the street, sees a truck bearing down on him and he is frozen in his tracks and stands staring at the truck. Scared silly, yet fascinated, he says to himself, "That damn thing is going to run over me!"

Awe is the emotional basis of all primitive religion.

In moments of awe we experience our lack of harmony with reality: "It's bigger than me; I can't handle it!" Awe is the reaction to *mystery*.

MYSTERY

Mystery is a reality which can be apprehended but not comprehended. It cannot be explained. A puzzle can be explained, whereas a mystery cannot. For example: interstellar space is a mystery. It is the "room" in which stars and planets and galaxies exist. So much I can *apprehend*. But does it have a limit? I cannot imagine it just coming to a stop at the last celestial body. But, on the other hand, I cannot imagine it going on and on either. It is something I cannot *comprehend*.

As a rational creature, the way I domesticate experience is by wrapping my mind around it. But when I try to wrap my mind around that, my head wants to split.

When we encounter mystery, we find paradox or dilemma. We find choices that are unmakeable; and we simply must let them stand.

There are *natural* and *supernatural* mysteries. Space is an example of a natural mystery. So is free will. But Jesus is an example of a *supernatural* mystery: He is both God and man, two natures in one person.

We are often tempted to choose one of the terms of the dilemma in order to resolve it by simply ignoring the other. But we can never get away with it when we do that; and all the great heresies started that way.

PRIMITIVE RELIGION

Now I am going to tell you two outrageous tales about the origin of primitive religion, in order to illustrate the relationship between one's dogmas about reality and the religion one practices.

A. John Smith, the Greek chicken farmer—

Greece has numerous valleys that run down to the Mediterranean. In most of them there are rivers flowing down to the sea. Long before the Classical period of Greek history (and, to be honest, long before chickens were really imported from India) there was a chicken farmer named John Smith, who lived in one of these valleys several miles from the village at the mouth of the river.

His usual route to the village was along the winding river bank. In one such bend in the river there was a dense wood.

One day he was on his way to the village with a basketful of eggs to swap for arrowheads, when he decided to take a short cut through the woods. In the middle of the wood he came upon a clearing which he had never discovered before.

It was about 30 feet across, and the surrounding trees grew exceptionally close together and very tall. So there was not much light there or much wind, only an occasional breeze. In the center of the clearing there was a flat-topped rock. He found it strangely quiet and peaceful there. So he began to make a habit of stopping there to rest every time he went to town.

When he was in town one day, he mentioned to a friend the place he had found in the woods. His friend said: “Yeah! I know just the place you mean! I stop there too. And sometimes I get the creepiest feeling—like I’m being watched, like I’m not alone. I wonder if he minds if we use his place?”

John Smith replied: “Yeah, I wonder too.” And the next time he stopped there, he really got the jitters. “What if ...?” So he took an egg out of his basket and placed it on the rock; and he said out loud: “Here, whoever you are, this is for you. Thanks for letting me visit your place.”

John Smith, you see, had offered a sacrifice as a means of dealing with an experience of awe.

There are two parts to a sacrifice: (a) something done, and (b) something said, to interpret and explain the thing that is done. The Hebrew patriarch Jacob had a similar experience at Bethel. See Genesis 28:10-18.

If we had visited that place a thousand years after John Smith, we would have discovered that his descendants had become a tribe of hereditary priests. In addition to raising chickens, their job was to offer sacrifices regularly in a temple standing over that flat rock in the clearing.

Twenty miles away there was another clearing in the middle of a wood. Elsewhere in Greece there were mountains with peculiar barren tops where the wind always whistled. There were waterfalls and blind canyons with powerful echoes. There were all sorts of fascinating and frighteningly strange places all over Greece.

For John Smith, the place itself was a god [Greek: *daemon*]; it seemed to have a personality. It was spooky, like a haunted house. In the course of time, the god/daemon of this forest merged with the god/daemon of that forest, and became the god/daemon of forests in general.

The processes of nature were John’s god—Mother Nature—who was entirely *immanent*, i.e. remaining entirely within this world [Latin: *in, in; manere*, to remain].

The early Greeks worshipped nature, with her mystery, power and wonder. The name for this is *pantheism* [Greek: *pan*, all: *theos*, god]. Their religion involved shrines, sacrifices, and drinking and dancing in the streets. It was a religion of fun. It had only one commandment: “Be natural; follow your impulses.”

But it had one fatal weakness: it could not support a morality. Because it assumed that nature is all there is, and everything is natural. So it does not provide any way to tell good from bad or the lesser good from the greater good.

For example, when a man is following his impulses, sooner or later he gets the impulse to make love to his neighbor's woman. And his neighbor gets the impulse to bash his brains in. The problem, you see, is that tigers are just as natural as bunny rabbits. And there is no animal as debased as a human being who tries to live like an animal.

Any approach to living which puts all of one's confidence in mastering nature is pantheism. Many Americans today are really pantheists, because they put their trust in science and technology which are simply means of understanding and manipulating the processes of nature.

And pantheism says: "If it's fun, do it!"

B. Abie McGillicuddy, the Semitic shepherd

Abie was a nomad who wandered from place to place in what is now known as Israel, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Arabia. He could only stay in one place for a week or two, until his sheep had eaten up all the grass. Then he and his family would move on to another grazing place.

One day when he was out with his flock in the open range a sudden electrical storm came up, as it often does in that part of the world. He was caught without any shelter. And so he looked up at the marvelous display of fireworks in the heavens, and he listened to the rumble of the thunder.

He was scared silly, but he was also fascinated. That is to say, he had an experience of awe. And he lived to tell about it!

A few weeks later when he was about twenty-five miles farther on, he saw another electrical storm and had a similar experience.

Then, still later on, he was camped near a volcanic mountain which began to erupt. Sparks were shooting out of the top, there was a great rumbling; dark clouds billowed out of the top of it; the earth under his feet was shaking.

It seemed to him that his old friend the storm(-god)—or was it his enemy?—had gotten into the mountain and was tearing it apart. Talk about power!

So Abie's God turned out to be not the god of one particular place – which was equal to any other place. His God was *other* than nature—and, indeed, appeared to be hostile to nature. When that God came into contact with the things of nature, nature got the worst of it. In the words of Psalm 104: "The earth shall tremble at the look of him; if he do but touch the hills, they shall smoke".

Abie's God was above and beyond nature: that is to say, he *transcended* nature.

Abie's God was never localized. Whenever it seemed he was about to be localized, something happened to make Abie move. And then Abie found God again in his new home as well. First, it

was Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai, then it was Shiloh, and then Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. And when Solomon built the Temple there it seemed he would stay there for good.

But even then, Abie was not allowed to “keep” his God there. The northern kingdom moved him to Mt. Gerizim, only to be carried off by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom was carried into captivity in Babylon—where they learned to worship their God in a strange land.

The God of the Hebrews was an “awful” God, who was outside nature and somehow against her. He was frequently angry. Isaiah, in the 8th century B.C., described him as “High and lifted up ...” surrounded by angels who call to each other “Holy, holy, holy”. The whole place shook and was filled with smoke. And the vision of God made Isaiah himself feel unclean [Isaiah 6:1-5].

To Abie, it seemed that he must turn his back on nature if he was to please his God: he must deny his impulses. So Abie was a *puritan*. Abie’s religion was always putting the damper on fun. “If it’s fun, don’t do it!”

But Abie’s religion did develop a really vigorous moral system which is still around today—and there are lots of puritans around in America.

Nevertheless, Abie could never be a thorough-going puritan. No one can, short of suicide. We depend on nature for shelter and food. We have to eat—and it is fun to eat!

Furthermore, at the direction of his God, Abie settled the land of Canaan—which forced him to master farming. So he was always, by implication, a *sacramentalist*. We will discuss *sacramentalism* a little later.

THE CHOICE

The ideal Greek was a nude, or semi-nude, figure dancing on a hillside with a jug of wine in one hand and a flute in the other. The Greek sought God in nature by trying to become one with nature, by trying to be natural.

The ideal Hebrew was a prophet, like Jeremiah or John the Baptist, who denounced sin and warned of the wrath of God to come.

The Greek religion had no connection with morality. The great Greek moral teacher Socrates was condemned to death for the crime of impiety.

But the Hebrew prophets were always denouncing the people for trying to substitute the offering of sacrifices for obedience to God, which was even more important than sacrifice. As the prophet Samuel said to King Saul, “To obey is better than sacrifice.”

Until Jesus came, mankind had a choice: the kind of religion the Greek had, or the kind of religion the Hebrew had.

- Greek *pantheism* said that God was locked up in nature, i.e. God remains in nature, or is immanent *only*. For pantheists, nature is all there is. So they are Materialists.

- Hebrew *transcendentalism* said that God was outside the natural order and completely separated from it, completely beyond it. Transcendentalists tend to be Puritans.

But the Hebrews were being led by God towards the sacramentalism of the Christian Church. Jesus was born among the Jews—which compelled those who accepted him as God-come-in-the-flesh to combine the viewpoints of both Greek and Jew.

The Christian believes that the transcendent God, who was progressively revealing himself to the Jews, is also immanent in the world. Spirit and matter for the Christian are not enemies but two aspects of one reality, because God, who is pure spirit, is also flesh and blood in Jesus of Nazareth.

PURITANISM AND MATERIALISM IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

The man on the street tends to be either a puritan or a materialist, because it seems simpler to be one or the other. Which of the two he is depends, in part, on how the world treats him and his kind. The same is true of Christians. When the Church felt itself to be persecuted, it tended to be puritanical. When it was accepted, it tended to become materialistic.

Christian history can be summarized and symbolized by thinking of the Church as a ship anchored in the middle of the mouth of a river near the ocean, so that the water-level rises and falls with the tide. The anchor chain is long enough to allow it to rise with the tide—but not so long as to allow it to go aground on either bank. One bank is labeled puritanism and the other materialism. If the anchor were to be moved from the center, sooner or later the ship would run aground.

For about the first three hundred years of Christian history the Church was persecuted. So it tended to be puritanical. But, during that time, God raised up bishops and prophets who reminded her that God had created the world and called it good; that he had entered it in the person of Jesus; and that in Christ human nature is united to God for all eternity—and therefore Christians ought not to call evil that which God called good.

For about the next two hundred years Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire, and it tended to become worldly and materialistic. Then God raised up bishops and prophets to remind Christians that their final happiness and fulfillment was not to be found in this world, but with God in eternity.

So things continued this way for some 1,500 years. The Church alternated between periods of puritanism, lasting 250 – 300 years, and periods of materialism, lasting 200 – 250 years. But the Church was able to ride things out, because the anchor was securely in the middle of the river.

That anchor is the dogma that God is both *TRANSCENDENT* and *IMMANENT*, that Jesus is both truly *GOD* and truly *MAN*—which is a theological mystery.

But around the year 1500 A.D., when the Church had been in one of its worldly phases for around 200 years, some of the prophets of the time lost their perspective, and panicked. In those places where they could get the support of the local ruler they pulled up the anchor, and they moved it over to the bank of puritanism - in order to pull the Church away from materialism, never permitting it to return.

This event is called the Protestant Reformation.

In England, however, although some wanted the anchor moved, the temptation was resisted. Nevertheless there was a serious effort to correct the abuses which materialism had introduced. But this was done without altering the fundamental nature of Christian belief and practice. Thus the Church of England remained Catholic while becoming Protestant.

CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT

Here we need some definitions

Catholic refers to that kind of Christianity which has the anchor in the middle of the river. It is the kind of Christianity which existed universally before the Protestant Reformers, especially John Calvin, the Lutherans, and the followers of Zwingli, moved the anchor to the puritan bank.

Protestant (properly used, in the original sense) meant protesting against abuses within the life of the Church, and in particular, against the exaggerated claims of the Pope, the Bishop of Rome.

The opposite of *Protestant* is papal, referring to the Pope.

The opposite of *Catholic* is sectarian, not Protestant. The sectarian spirit leads to *heresy*.

Heresy means some form of Christianity which is one-sided, or leaves out some part of the basic Christian belief. It often takes the form of over-emphasizing some aspect of Christian truth at the expense of some other aspect. The word is derived from the Greek *haeresis*, meaning “choice”. Heresy is choosing to leave something out, to pick and choose the parts that appeal to you.

Their emphasis on God’s transcendence made the Reformers uncomfortable with the sacraments and with the sacramental way of looking at things. In moving the anchor they unintentionally fell into various forms of heresy, because they were denying the material side of reality.

In some places in Europe, there was such strong reaction against what the reformers wanted to do that it took several decades for the abuses to be dealt with. And then the Church reacted by becoming more and more *bureaucratic*, with power increasingly *centralized* at the top.

The Church in England, however, avoided the problems of bureaucracy and centralized power. Rather, it remained a *pastoral* form of Catholicism, much like the Orthodox Church of the East, as well as the whole Church of the first few centuries.

In those places where the puritans won out, Christianity was perceived to be officially puritan – and eventually it was often simply abandoned. People professed themselves to be “enlightened”, and atheism began to spread. This was characteristic of the eighteenth century “Enlightenment” or “Age of Reason”.

It appeared to those people that there was a war between science and religion. When in fact, it was a war between two false religions: puritanism and materialism. There is, of course, no war between true science and Catholic Christianity.

Since the Reformation, the cycle of 250-year swings has continued—and we may now be coming to the end of what has been a period of worldliness for Christianity.

During the last few centuries there has been another cycle at work among some Christians in America, a cycle which has been superimposed on the basic pattern. After the puritan Pilgrims had been in this country for a generation or so, they became relatively prosperous. In New England they were in effect, the “established” church.

They seemed to get worldly, in spite of their puritan ideology. So a reaction occurred, and some of the brethren withdrew to form a new church which would be “really” Christian, i.e. puritanical. That lasted about a generation or so. Then a new “really righteous” or “really Christian” church had to be founded.

This went on and on until, today, there are literally thousands of Protestant denominations in the United States.

TURNING POINTS IN THE HISTORY OF WESTERN CHRISTIANITY

- 30 A.D. The Resurrection, the Ascension, Pentecost. The Church tends to be puritanical, because it is persecuted.
- 312 A.D. The Edict of Milan makes Christianity legal. The Church tends to become worldly.
- 500 A.D. The Roman Empire of the West falls to the barbarians. Islam arises and begins to conquer parts of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Church enters a time of austerity.
- 800 A.D. In the west Charlemagne is crowned Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. The Church becomes worldly.
- 1000 A.D. The Church becomes austere and vigorous. The Crusades are launched in 1095 to stem the tide of Islam and to free the Holy Land.
- 1300 A.D. Peace. The Muslim threat to Europe subsides. Materialism and moral decay occur.
- 1500 A.D. The Reformation begins. Puritanism becomes established in parts of Europe,
- 1750 A.D. The Enlightenment—“The Age of Reason”. The rise of secular rationalism;
- 2000 A.D. Thirty-five years earlier it had seemed that we were on the threshold of the reunion of the Church, but no longer. Instead, a drastic realignment seems in the making. In all the Christian bodies of the west, there is a struggle between the secular liberals, many of whom are pantheists, and the traditionalists who will be tempted more and more to become puritanical in reaction, and at the very least will take morality seriously.

It is too early to say what the outcome of this struggle will be. But it has certainly arrived on schedule, and the battle has been joined.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What are your dogmas?

If you win the bet and they turn out to be true, will you rejoice?

Are there other dogmas on which you would rather bet your life?

How about the Christian dogma?

Ladies and gentlemen, place your bets.