

Is Christianity Dying?

From the series: Tough Questions; No Easy Answers

Scripture: Habakkuk 1:1-5; 3:17-19; Luke 3:1-9; 19:37-38

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Is Christianity dying? That is a tough question and there is no easy answer. Let me acknowledge at the outset that no one can answer that question with certainty.

Is Christianity in trouble? Yes.

If that is challenged by pointing out that it is in trouble in Europe and the West in general, but flourishing in Africa and some other regions, I would respond by saying that the same secularizing tendencies and advance of scientific knowledge that have put it in peril in the West will have to be dealt with wherever the Church extends itself.

I suspect Christianity as an institutionalized religion is dying in the form in which we have known it. But, perhaps the question, "Is Christianity Dying?" is not the best way to formulate the question. It would be better to ask as does Charles Davis in the book he entitled *What Is Living, What Is Dead in Christianity Today?* And I even prefer a further sharpening of the question: "What can Christianity become for us?"

That is a crucial question and that is the really critical matter: What can this 200-year-old religious tradition, through which and in which we have been formed, become for us?

To become a significant shaper of our lives and an ongoing, dynamic faith tradition, Christianity must undergo a major creative transformation. Continuing on its present course in fundamentalist form, or even in strongly orthodox or timidly mainline expression, Christianity will not continue.

Let's probe this question and as we do, I will do as I have been driven to do throughout this series - I will focus on the phenomenon of religion because, obviously, Christianity is a religion and to examine it, we must be clear about the nature of religion.

Lest you forget, I say again; *religion is a construct of the human mind*. We create religions as human beings.

A religion is a humanly constructed symbol system that provides an orientation for our lives, supplying us with a map for negotiating life's passages, offering us an interpretation of culture, history, human action and the transcendent Mystery of our existence.

Feuerbach in the 19th century saw religion as a human invention arising out of the human situation of need and threat. In Feuerbach's understanding, God was simply a human projection of one's own idealized self.

We have recognized the genius of Feuerbach's analysis of religion, but we have demurred at one critical point; we have claimed that the creation of religion on the part of humankind is the consequence of a prior address from beyond or from our depths, an address that puts us in question, that calls forth our response in the form of religious faith, devotion and practice.

Religious faith or awe or wonder or fear is response to an experience of some Reality. Charles Davis writes,

The reality experienced in faith does not manifest itself as an object. It reveals itself as the term of a feeling response but remains hidden from us or unknown inasmuch as it does not appear to consciousness as an apprehensible object. ... feelings rest upon a oneness between the subject and what is felt.... Feelings are responses springing from what we are. They are responses of our being to reality as we meet it. Our feeling responses depend upon what we have become as beings, what we are as persons. Feelings are the resonance of reality upon human subjects, the arousal of our personal being through union with a reality present to us. In the case of religious feeling, the response of our spiritual effectivity to transcendent reality precedes knowledge and continues without any direct knowledge of a kind that would make the term of that response a known object. The reality that draws us where our own being falls off into nothingness, the reality that gives a sense of basic fulfillment at the center of our emptiness, remains outside our intellectual grasp. (pp. 9-10)

Feuerbach's claim that religion is a merely human activity with no referent beyond the human subject remains an unproven and unprovable assertion. The same is true for the claim I make that faith is response to that which encounters us, to the Mystery that meets us, but can never be grasped because it remains hidden.

This is the watershed; the great Divide. But the claims are beyond verification; each of us must decide if we believe we are addressed by Someone, Something beyond us, or, conjuring up a fiction.

To conclude the latter is the end of religion as a viable, meaningful human activity; to conclude the former sees the variety of religions and religious beliefs and practices as modes of response to a Reality beyond us, although present to us. And that is our claim.

That being the case, we can see Christianity as a human creation in response to the Mystery as manifested in Jesus of Nazareth.

In sum: we affirm the Mystery we term God and we affirm the nature of that Mystery as defined in Jesus, the concrete, human, historical expression of the Mystery.

Well, perhaps you breathe a sigh of relief; Christianity is then a genuine article, a faith response to the Mystery of Reality, to God. And that is true enough, except it is not the only religious response to the Mystery; religion is a universal phenomenon of humankind. Are we prepared to say that our response in the Christian tradition is the only response that reveals the Mystery and mediates a saving, healing communion?

That's one question; but there is a second: Has the tradition faithfully and adequately responded in light of the ongoing drama of creation and human development?

Let's deal with the second question first and let us be reminded of the temptation to which all religion in institutional form is subject, the temptation to freeze a given form and absolutize it, denying the dynamic movement of history and human development, and thus denying the imperative that the religious symbol system remain open to re-symbolization, to fresh expression and new forms.

I chose the scripture lessons with this tendency of religious institutions to absolutize themselves in mind.

A late seventh century B.C.E. prophet in Judah surveyed the moral and spiritual life of his people and found it wanting. Habakkuk, in the prophetic book that bears his name, cries out to the God of Israel,

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you, "Violence!"
and you will not save?*

In a word, the prophet cries out to God to do something to turn the nation from its spiritual decay. The writing goes on to record the Lord's response - the work becomes a dialogue between God and the prophet. God's response:

... a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told.

We learn that Judah is indeed in for judgment and that to be inflicted by the great and growing power of Babylon. Thus Habakkuk has his answer: God is doing something, but now the prophet has a larger problem. How can the God of Israel utilize a pagan power to bring judgment on God's chosen people? Judah had strayed from God's ways and the prophet sought God's movement to judge and through judgment bring grace. But Babylon or, as they are called in the text, the Chaldeans? No way! That was too much. Israel was God's chosen; Judah was God's special people. Habakkuk simply could not conceive of God raising up a foreign power against God's own.

That attitude was always present in the tradition of Israel and always challenged by Israel's own prophetic voice. It is such an attitude that was attacked by John the Baptist who called the Jewish people to repentance on the banks of the Jordan River outside Jerusalem.

It was the first century C.E., a time of apocalyptic expectations, a time of great ferment and expectation of some dramatic in-breaking of God ringing down the curtain of history. John the Baptist, like Habakkuk before him, was a fiery preacher of judgment calling God's people to repent and prepare to meet their God.

But the party line of the religious establishment resented such radical preaching and the exposing of their spiritual and moral apathy. Were they not God's elect, immune to God's purging action? No, claims John the Baptist.

Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor;" for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees... Luke 3:8-9

Jesus, too, ran headlong into the religious establishment, the guardians of the institutional forms and traditions of Israel. Luke tells us of the Palm Sunday procession to Jerusalem. The disciples are praising God with joy and no doubt displaying a festive holiday spirit. The Pharisees tell Jesus to make them cease their celebration, to which Jesus responds,

... if these were silent, the stones would shout out.

And Luke tells us, Jesus came over the crest of the hill and saw Jerusalem in full view and he wept. He wept for what he saw as the inevitable horror that would befall the city because of the mind-set, the spiritual blindness he had encountered in the Temple establishment, which was also the center of political power.

If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ... you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God. ... Luke 19:41-44

What is my point?

Simply this: Religion is a human construction in response to an address from beyond, an encounter with the Mystery of Reality that becomes present in the consciousness of humankind. All religious response is not the same, offering equal clarity or illumination, resulting in equal fruitfulness in human lives. Some responses are the result of penetrating insight, the Gift of the Spirit. Some have less of beauty and elevating capacity, but *no religion is absolute; none is without human limitation and distortion. And none is absolutely essential for the unfolding of the Mystery of the cosmic drama.*

Let me expand on that for a moment. I raise the question, "Is Christianity Dying?" in this message. I would never have conceived of such a question when I arrived here in 1960, nor when I returned in 1971. To contemplate the demise of Christianity would have been beyond the boundaries of my thinking. Jesus was God's supreme and last word; Christianity the one true religion, the result not of human construction, but totally of God's revealing. History was moving toward an End at which point Jesus Christ would appear on earth and bring in the Kingdom of God.

It never occurred to me that such simplistic thinking was one more instance of Habakkuk's horror at the thought of Babylon breaking Judah, or John's opponents who said, "Hey, we have Abraham as our father," or the religious establishment who refused God's visitation in Jesus.

Neither was I at all aware of the uncritical arrogance of such a position;

- The arrogance of assuming God's ways were synonymous with the human religious response of my tradition;
- The arrogance of assuming no other human religious response could be the consequence of a genuine encounter with God;
- The arrogance of assuming God's ultimate purposes could not be accomplished apart from my religious system.

It just never occurred to me. In spite of the prophetic core of the Hebrew Scriptures and the ministry of Jesus in his own conflict with the established religious structure, I failed to see that I had made an idol of my own tradition and absolutized it, as though God had created it rather than recognizing it as a human creation of response.

That it is a human response, a human construct does not mean that it is not response to authentic encounter, that the encounter has not yielded genuine insight into the nature of the Mystery as gracious, nor that the structured response does not mediate healing grace. All of that, I believe, is true of our Christian faith tradition; all of that has indeed been the fruit of Christianity.

But, it is not the only tradition; it is not alone the true glimpse of the Truth.

Earlier I raised two questions: Has Christianity faithfully and adequately responded to the Light of the ongoing drama of Creation and human development, and is it the only response that is genuine response to the Mystery? To the second question, I answer "No." To the first "Yes" and "No." Yes, Christianity has been a faithful response mediating true insight and grace, but "No," in the sense that it has become frozen, absolutized itself and failed to continue to remain open to new knowledge requiring new symbols bearing fresh understanding of the Mystery that is God, the cosmic process, the meaning of human existence and the wonder of it all.

Unless Christianity undergoes creative transformation, it will die. In a recent interview in *The Christian Century*, a Yale professor of the philosophy of religion speaks of the failure of Christianity any longer to provide the integration of all other elements of life. Louis Dupré contends,

... religion must in some way integrate the profane and the sacred. Obviously, Christianity no longer plays an integrating role in the life of modern societies. Certainly for most people in the West, especially in Western Europe, it has lost its creative, formative power. Christianity has become simply one element of civilization among many others, and by no means the most important. In the past religious integration was handed down by a tradition. But that tradition itself has lost its authority in the eyes of our contemporaries, including most believers. (July 16-23, 1997, p. 655)

Dupré sketches a historical perspective much as we have been attempting in this series. Why, he was asked, is it especially difficult to be Christian in our time? To that question, he responds,

Culture as a whole has become secular in a way that it has never been before. One may plausibly argue that the 18th century was the first non-Christian century. Most leading thinkers and artists, even if they were not opposed to Christianity, ceased to take their inspiration from it: secularization became dominant. Still, even at that time, Western culture was so penetrated by Christian values and ideas that one might mistake entire passages of Voltaire or Diderot as having been written by believing Christians. Eighteenth-century culture was still steeped in a tradition that had been Christian since its beginning, and it was extremely difficult for these thinkers to free themselves from a language saturated with religion.

The 19th century was different. It was an epoch marked by a virulent antitheistic campaign to clean the culture slate of all Christian traces. Yet these attacks were the work of an elite; culture at large retained distinct remnants of its Christian roots.

Even today ties still exist between Christianity and culture in Europe and more so in the U.S.. But on a more fundamental level, the West appears to have said its definitive farewell to a Christian culture. Little of the old hostility remains. Our secular colleagues are happy to recognize the debt our civilization owes to the Christian faith to the extent that the faith, having been absorbed by culture itself, has become simply another cultural artifact. Christianity has become an historical factor subservient to a secular culture rather than functioning as the creative power it once was. The new attitude of benign atheism was, I think, prepared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the three most prominent secularizers of the time, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche.

The interviewer then asks:

Why single them out? How did they differ from the earlier atheists you mention?

For Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, the idea of forcibly eradicating religion had become unnecessary. Religion for them was a passing symptom that was rapidly vanishing by itself. Already Marx had moved beyond the idea of atheism as a mere assertion of the unreality of God. For Marx, concentrating on atheism distracts us from the positive task of liberating humanity from social oppression. Lenin's active atheism, in which he used the state to try to destroy religion, is actually a fallback to earlier attitudes about religion. Freud admitted that no one can be forced *not* to believe. But as rational thought shows nothing in favor of religion and everything against it, to persist in a faith because no argument can decisively refute it is for Freud the sign of a lazy mind. Nietzsche preached a spiritual gospel, a new religion without God, beyond Christianity and atheism, that could still learn much from the old faiths.

Moving further in that direction, contemporary secular culture, especially in its communications media, shows a surprising openness toward religion. But little suggests that this interest surpasses the purely horizontal cultural level. Culture itself has become the real religion of our time, and it has absorbed all other religion as a subordinate part of itself. It even offers some of the emotional benefits of religion, without exacting the high price faith demands. We have all become atheists, not in the hostile, antireligious sense of an earlier age, but in the sense that God no longer matters *absolutely* in our closed world, if God matters at all.

Further along in the interview, Dupré suggested what I believe will be essential if Christianity is to be renewed and find new and vital expression. He had spoken of the necessity of individual spiritual renewal and then the statement was made,

Your view of the spiritual life seems to encourage interfaith encounter.

He responded,

In our age we have come to understand our faith within the context of the aspirations, desires and needs expressed in so many forms since the beginning of the human race. We have learned to respect these many ways of humankind's longing for God in the light of our own faith. Some Christians have been inspired to integrate pious attitudes and meditative practices derived from other faiths within their own, without betraying Christianity's unique identity. In doing so they are following ancient examples. Christians have received so much from the Hebrew mother faith of which they are no longer aware. Also from the fourth century on, Greek fathers generously borrowed Neoplatonic speculation to an extent that, via Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius and Maximum Confessor, late Greek piety has shaped the very nature of Christian mysticism. Why should we then not be allowed, as even the desert fathers were, to borrow meditative exercises that centuries of pre-Christian practice have left us?

In fact, here also the analogy of faith urges us to see the existence of other religions in the light of God's providence. Buddhist silence may help the Christian in deepening insight into the mystery of the Trinity where the Father is the silent source of the eternal Word. And how could God's omnipresence in Vedantic Hinduism not remind the Christian of the Spirit, *qui replevit orbem terrarum*—who fills the entire world? Such analogies cannot be fortuitous to the Christian mind, and we do well to heed them as signs of a divine Providence that, with loving care, rules not only Christians but all humans.

It would be wrong, however, to regard these analogies as justifying a syncretistic relativism that entitles each person to compose his or her own religious collage. This attitude, all too common today, shows a lack of respect not only for one's own faith but also for those faiths one so casually dismantles for spare parts. It is yet another manifestation of that radical anthropocentrism, the main enemy of sincere religion, that tempts believers to bring the language of transcendence down to the level of purely human wants and choice. Without detracting from the providential nature of other faiths, Christians cannot ignore the fact that this same Providence has led them to a faith that is not a "choice" but, for those chosen to it, an absolute summons. To relativize faith is, I think, to subvert its fundamentally divine character.

Here I think Dupré points to that which we have begun to experience -

that encounter with other genuine faith traditions not only leads us to a new respect for the breadth of response to the Mystery in the broad spectrum of religious traditions, but also deepens us in our own faith tradition and enhances our own spiritual experience, enriching it and authenticating it as indeed revelatory and the mediator of grace.

What we are recognizing is the distinction between faith as response to the address of God, the Mystery of our existence, and the structure of beliefs that are formulated in response to that revelatory encounter. Such a formulation of beliefs is the human construction of a religious tradition. The encounter is initiated from the other side. Religion is the consequence, a human activity of reflection and the attempt to give some shape to the experience of the Mystery. In the words of Charles Davis,

The absoluteness of faith is the absoluteness of total demand and total response in an experience of unrestricted love in relation to hidden transcendence or mystery. Faith is the drive toward transcendence, the thrust of human beings out of and beyond themselves, out of and beyond all the limited orders and human certainties under which they live, in an attempt to open themselves to the totality of existence and reach unlimited reality and ultimate value. It is a total response to the felt reality of a total demand. That absoluteness of faith should not be confused with a certitude of belief. (p. 67)

Faith, Davis points out, gives assurance of a lived relationship, not absolute intellectual certitude. The human construction of religion takes the form of concepts and propositions. These cannot give absolute certitude; they are human constructs, not to be identified with the Divine. They are pointers, gropings, partial, limited, in a word - human.

As David claims,

Faith has a paradoxical character. It is a presence that is at the same time an absence, because no positive experience can lay hold of the transcendent. At the heart of faith is a negative experience, an experience that seems like a non-experience, because it is the breakdown of every finite experience, of all our concepts, images and feelings. Faith follows a narrow path between idolatry on the one side and nihilism on the other. Much religion is idolatrous inasmuch as it absolutizes some finite experience or expression. When faith is not idolatrous, it is difficult to distinguish from nihilism, because the presence it mediates is as transcendence, an absence on the human level, its plentitude is a void or emptiness of finite reality and meaning, its love co-exists with a sense of abandonment. What distinguishes the negative experience of faith from the unfaith of nihilism is precisely the refusal of closure, the willingness to accept a world without boundaries, even though on the cognitive level that

demands the surrender of a stable truth, a fixed center, a final meaning of our religious texts and of our human existence. (p. 76)

Is Christianity dying?

In its present form, unless it undergoes creative transformation, "Yes."

But, God is not dead; the Mystery continues to breathe through the whole cosmic process, enlivening all that exists, beckoning us toward fuller spiritual life. And the concretization of the Mystery in the humanness of Jesus, in which our faith tradition finds its center, still challenges us to humane existence lived in the Presence of God.

This is the amazing possibility to which this incredible moment in our life together calls us; this is the opportunity of a lifetime. We are cut loose, set free, not to separate ourselves from our spiritual heritage, but to open ourselves to a whole new appreciation of the encounter from beyond ourselves, calling us beyond every limited understanding and formulation to wonders not yet dreamed of.

Thus, Christianity will not die, but live, transformed, standing in continuity with the heritage of faith we have entered into, continuing to provide us with insight, meaning and confident assurance.

Its authentication will be its capacity to connect with our ongoing human experience. No longer will authoritarian claims, whether of tradition, Church, or Bible, be submitted to. That is not to deny the reality of divine revelation; it is simply to recognize in Davis' words, that

The appeal to revelation belongs to a culture in which the important truths concerning human life and society are handed down by teachers having authority and are proclaimed for acceptance as sacred.

Such a culture no longer exists for us. Post Enlightenment, the appeal is rather to critical rationality and that presupposes an open community of discourse in which all the members participate in seeking knowledge and in which any claim to acceptance must rest upon evidence and argumentation open to scrutiny and criticism by all.

Biblical criticism will not be reversed. We simply know, as Davis declares,

The typical biblical book does not come down to us all of a piece from some acknowledged prophetic figure or divine messenger, but as the documentary sediment of the history of a people, with originating factors too complex for disentanglement with more than changing probability. This has changed our understanding of the authority of a biblical text. It is

not that of an oracle from on high but that of an expression of the religious identity of a particular people. (p. 110)

Nevertheless, what we find in the Bible are paradigms of faith, expressions of the total response of persons and a community of persons whose experience of having been addressed elicits the absoluteness of trust in the Mystery of grace. Habakkuk found himself in turmoil over the ways of God; his parochialism was shattered; he did not pretend to understand. But his encounter with the Holy One of Israel issued in that beautiful expression of trust with which his writing concludes. In a word, he says, "Strip me of everything, let disaster come;

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

Such trust is absolute, even when life is confusing and answers to our questions evade us.

Such trust is enough in life, in death.

References:

Charles Davis, Interview, *The Christian Century*, July 16-23, 1997, p. 655f).