

Comments on the Theological and Philosophical Foundations of Christianity

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HISTORICAL CHRISTIANITY IS A remarkable composite of diverse religious cultures, a mixture that even today, after two millennia, is still mixing, blending things that often will not blend and fusing the unfusable. Sometimes severe, chaste, and utterly simple, at other times a confusing concoction of antithetical ingredients, Christianity exhibits at once the human capacity for cultural syncretism, the human need for religious satisfaction, and the human propensity to credulity. In this religion there is something for everyone: Roman hierarchy for the authoritarians, Jewish law for the moralists, Greek metaphysics for the rationalists, Syrian mysticism for the mystics, Persian eschatology for the millenarians, Egyptian asceticism for the masochists, Alexandrian cosmogony for the theologs, priesthood for the priestly, original sin for the sinners, redemption for the regenerate.

The Roman world in which Christianity was born was a marvelous pageant of gods, saviors, temples, priests, prophets, messiahs, mystics, philosophers, holy books, moral law, traditions, processions, incense, vestments, sacrificial ritual, and every manner of holy magic. From the fourth century B.C.E., with the conquests of Alexander and by the grace of empire and Greek language and literature, the eastern Mediterranean world was progressively saturated with Hellenistic culture, a culture hungrily embraced by the Romans, who had an impressive talent for adopting, adapting, and converting ideas to practice, science to engineering, ethics to morals, and metaphysics to religion. Never has there been a civilization more saturated with

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religion—religious cults and religious philosophies imported and transported throughout the Empire by commerce and the military. By the end of the fourth century C.E., Christianity had triumphed and had displaced all of them—displaced them in part by defeating them, in part by absorbing them. It had become the religious mainstream that issued from the confluence of the multiple cultures of the Judaic-Hellenistic-Roman world.

Most Christians regard themselves as the successors of the people of the Bible, the heirs of their religion. But, strangely, they seem to forget, or want to forget, that Jesus was a believing, practicing Jew, that his religion was simply a liberal form of the messianic, eschatological Judaism common among the Jewish sects of his time. His message was the imminence of the kingdom of God, though it has never been quite clear what he meant by kingdom; he clearly was not obsessed with sin, as most Christians have been. As a faithful Jew, he believed in the observance of the Torah; he preached in the synagogue; he honored the moral law and the prophetic traditions of his people; he accepted and respected the temple; and he founded no church.

The early followers of Jesus after Pentecost were Jews or Jewish converts who believed that the Messiah had come. He had apparently failed in his Messianic mission, but he would return in glory. Under the leadership of James, the brother of Jesus, and Peter the apostle, they became a community of the believers in Christ, but not a church opposed to Judaism and its institutions. However, this Jewish Christianity, the closest thing to the religion of Jesus himself, did not survive as a historical movement much beyond the first century. The disastrous Jewish revolt that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the year 70 seriously injured the Christian community. There were migrations of the faithful and difficulties with the Jewish authorities; by the end of the century, the Jewish Christians had effectively disappeared from history. But the non-Jewish Christianity created by Paul and the Hellenizers survived; it not only survived but flourished. Incredible as it may seem, it eventually conquered the Empire, became the culture of medieval Europe, and, though somewhat decadent and at times corrupt, it is still with us in diverse forms and with disparate strength.

To say the least, it would be interesting to know what Jesus would say to the leaders of the churches which carry his name if he were in fact to return now and do a survey of Christendom. What would he think of the pomp and circumstance of the Roman Church, its doctrine of infallibility, or the magical practice of its communicants in drinking the substance of his blood and eating the substance of his flesh? When he met him, what did Jesus say to Luther about his extreme

doctrine of salvation by grace only, or to Calvin when he discussed with him the doctrine of divine election and predestination? What would his attitude be toward the millions of born-again today who think they have achieved salvation and a bit of divinity by confessing him as their savior, or his opinion of the charismatics with their superstitious nonsense? Or what would he think of the obscene carryings-on of some of the electronic evangelists? And what would he say to those Mormons who believe that through ritual and obedience to their leaders they can actually earn and deserve a piece of eternal glory?

It would have been utterly fascinating to have overheard Jesus' conversation with the Apostle Paul when they first met in heaven, if, indeed, Paul made it to heaven and they were on speaking terms. What did he say to this powerful, sin-obsessed preacher who converted the simple faith of the followers of Jesus into a Hellenistic-Roman mystery and who was the chief inventor of the concept of original sin, arguably the worst idea that ever infected the human mind?

We know very little for sure about Jesus. Here we are dependent almost entirely on the Synoptic Gospels—not on the Gospel of John, which is essentially a theological treatise affected by gnosticism and the Greek concept of the *logos*; and we learn almost nothing of him from the extant writings of Paul, who, like most of the theologs who followed him, was consumed with concern for salvation through faith in the dying and rising savior God and who almost totally ignored Jesus as a living person in Galilee and Judea. But even the Synoptics tell us very little that is known for sure, and they severely distort the picture of the Jewish religion, as expressed in Pharisaism, and Jesus' reaction to it. The Gospel of John, probably written after the break with Judaism, is a frankly anti-Semitic document.

But enough of this. I will leave aside consideration of the ecclesiastical facets of the early church, its structure and forms, the influence of classical polytheism and the mystery religions on the Christian cult and its hagiology, the clash with civil authority, the life-and-death struggle of the church with gnosticism, and even the internal contentions on the nature of Christ which led at Nicaea and Constantinople to the classical Christology. I prefer, rather, to call your attention to the fundamental impact of Greek metaphysics on the foundation idea of religion, the concept of God.

First, a word of caution—two words of caution. It is a common error, especially among non-Catholics, to describe the early centuries of Christianity as a good religion gone bad, corrupted by an invasion of foreign ideas and practices. But this is an inversion of the facts. It was the Christian religion that did the invading, thanks to the missionary zeal of Paul and the other Hellenists, whoever they were. They

can be accused of corrupting the pagan religions by the infusion of Jewish-Christian elements. Who won out and who lost in the long run is a matter of one's point of view. Christianity is a Graeco-Roman religion as well as a biblical religion, but the defeat of the anti-Semitic gnostic Christians guaranteed a continuing tie of Christianity with the Bible and the biblical tradition. So the people of the Book were the good guys, at least back when the Book was being written, and the Greek philosophers who so greatly influenced Christian theology turn out to be bad.

Now my other word of caution. There was really nothing all that bad about those Greek philosophers. It has been mainly the anti-Greek prejudices of the Protestant reformers, especially Luther, that have made so much of a great apostasy of Christianity, the corruption of an initially pure, religious faith. Actually the faith was never all that pure, and the corruptors were simply doing what they did best—trying to make some kind of sense of the Christian beliefs in terms of the accepted ideas, attitudes, and methods of their own culture. That is the task of the theologian, to make sense of the people's beliefs. These people, the early gentile Christians, belonged to two cultures, very much as most of us today belong to the same two cultures, the Greek and the Judaic. They were attempting, as we are often attempting, to produce some kind of harmony of the two, a culture which was scientifically and philosophically grounded, whose dominant method was the processes of reason, and a culture which was grounded in commandment, whose method was dogmatic and authoritative. When a person today undertakes to make a case, for instance, for evolution and also for the book of Genesis, he or she is doing in principle what these early theologians were doing. They became branded as apostates, for the heretics and apostates are those who lose the argument. The winners are the orthodox. It's a little like Bertrand Russell's comments some years ago on the question "What is truth?" Russell belonged to the great era when Britannia ruled the waves. The truth, he said, is the majority opinion of the party in power in the nation that has the most battleships.

There were some, of course, who simply held that the two cultures, Jewish and Hellenistic, were entirely discordant and incommensurable. "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" asked Tertullian, the first of the great Latin theologians. "Nothing," was his reply. But this was the same Tertullian who, turning his back on the attempt to create a rational theology, wrote the famous statement, "Credo quia absurdum"—"I believe because it is absurd." Now a surprising number of people do believe absurdities; absurdities are what they prefer to believe; we can hear them carrying on any Sunday morning on TV. But most of us would like to believe in things that make sense. So we

often go to absurd lengths in trying to make sense of what we believe. At least we support the theologians who do it for us.

Strange as it may seem, the chief creator of Christian theology was a Jew, Philo Judaeus of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus who was the foremost Jewish philosopher of antiquity and who probably never heard of Jesus or the Christians. Like most of us, Philo belonged to two intellectual cultures, the Mosaic culture of Judaism, and the Platonic-Stoic culture of Alexandria, in his day the intellectual capital of the Empire. Judaism was and is a religion grounded in law and practice. In part thanks to Philo, Christianity is a religion grounded in theology, the most theologized of all the world's religions. Philo was determined to produce a harmony of the two cultures, of Moses and Plato. What God had given by revelation to Moses, he had given through the processes of reason to Plato. Philo undertook to establish this identity through a quite tortuous use of allegory, a popular Stoic literary device of that time.

When Christian theology really got going in the second and third centuries, its most enduring developments were centered in Alexandria, and its foremost theologians, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, followed the pattern of speculative theology laid down by Philo. These men and numerous others like them, who were in direct and indirect ways responsible for the character of Christian theology, were involved quite inevitably in building Greek ideas into the structure of the theology. They were Greek in education, Hebraic in belief. That the product was a corruption of the original beliefs of Jesus and the early Jewish Christians is entirely obvious. But that in itself doesn't mean that the ideas were bad. Ideas, whether in religion or anywhere else, are to be judged on their own merit, not simply on their origin.

Without the attempt at accommodation of the two intellectual cultures, Christianity would have disappeared even before Clement and Origen came along and would not have been heard of again. There would have been no Christianity today. Perhaps we would have been Mithraics, except that we wouldn't be we. Now, of course, maybe that would have been a good thing. It all depends on your point of view, your biases and prejudices. In the fourth century, Constantine favored Christianity and legalized its practice. But an early successor of Constantine, the Emperor Julian, a classical scholar of no mean accomplishment, was quite sure that Christianity was bad for the Empire, and he tried to turn things around in favor of the old ways and the old religion. Poor Julian failed in this venture and has been known ever since as Julian the Apostate. Even Edward Gibbon in his great work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* held that Christianity was a major cause of the Empire's demise. He was probably right.

But now to the concept of God. Here the main thrust of Greek thought and the doctrines of Philo, taken from the mixture of Platonism and Stoicism popular in his place and time, were to affect the Christian creeds down to the present. Philo held that the existence of God can be known, but his essence, his nature, cannot be known. God is “unnamable,” “ineffable,” and “incomprehensible.” God, said Philo, is a transcendent, absolute being, neither in space nor in time. This was a derivative from the metaphysics of the Pythagoreans, Parmenides, and Plato, the idea that ultimate being in its highest ontological reaches is in utter contrast to the sensible world of things in space and events in time. The ultimate reality has neither place, shape, nor position; it is spaceless. And it has neither past, present, nor future; it is timeless. Not timeless in the poetic sense of a very long or endless time, but timeless in the sense of its not being in time at all. This idea of eternity has dominated Christian theology to the present time. As the creator of time and space, God is not *in* time or space. To say that God is spaceless and eternal does not mean that space and time are unreal. They are real because God created them. But they are subject to him, not him to them.

“The great Cause of all things,” wrote Philo, “does not exist in time, nor at all in place, but he is superior to both time and place; for, having made all created things in subjection to himself, he is surrounded by nothing, but he is superior to everything” (1890, 1:289). This idea had implications that reached into every facet of theology; and when, in the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, it was joined with the biblical conception of God as a personal creator, it generated enough problems to keep the theologians busy for centuries. The worst of those problems are still with us, or at least with the theologians, because God described in these terms is an absolute—not just an absolute being among others, but *the* absolute—and the absolute is the unconditioned and unrelated. How can it, or he, be in any way related to the world, the world of things in space and events in time, for he is spaceless and timeless? And how can he be a he—or even a she?

Aristotle, Plato’s student and the chief intellectual ornament of the human race, was in on this piece of metaphysics. Aristotle’s God does not even know that the world exists, because he is pure thought and his absolute perfection means that he can think only himself. He can have no experience of the world. More than two thousand years later, Alfred North Whitehead wisely observed that Aristotle’s metaphysics “did not lead him very far towards the production of a God available for religious purposes” (1927, 249).

Now, although his God was defined by Greek descriptions, Philo was a believing Jew who accepted the Hebrew scriptures, and for him

God was also the biblical creator who had relations with the spatial world of things, to say nothing of his involvement with time and even human history. To handle this problem, Philo, who was not at all consistent in his views, provided for intermediaries which did relate to the world—especially the *logos*, a divine reason, God's instrument through whom the world was created. This was supposed to take care of the problem of the unrelated absolute. Whether this idea was borrowed from Philo for the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, which identifies the *logos* with Christ, is not known. But it became and remains a foundation of Christology, an indispensable element of Christian theology.

Now, to make a very long and involved story short and oversimplified, as Christian theology developed, achieving its classical form in St. Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries, a conception of God emerged as a living person of moral will and purpose, the biblical creator God and Lord of history, defined by descriptions taken from elements of Greek philosophy that described God by the impersonal categories of an absolutistic metaphysics. Here, in a compound of contradictory ingredients, especially the personal and the impersonal, was the making of centuries' worth of theological dispute, vain speculation, and doctoral dissertations.

One of the remarkable things about Christian theology has been the success of certain of its basic creeds that have satisfied the disparate branches of the church. The Nicene creed of 325 is the most notable example, accepted by both Catholics and Protestants as the foundation of Christology. It holds that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in substance, an ingenious attempt to preserve monotheism by the employment of an Aristotelian conception of substance. Equally impressive has been the general acceptance of the common view, as found in both Catholic and Protestant creeds, that God is without body, parts, or passions. The First Article of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, for instance, contains the familiar formula, "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness. . . ."

Now, I don't much like this description, but when I say that it is more Greek than biblical, I don't mean that it is therefore a bad one, because I am as pleased with our Greek heritage as with our Hebrew. Much that is of greatest worth in our culture—our entire scientific tradition, for instance—is essentially Greek in origin. But what does this formula mean? That God is without a body, that is, that he doesn't fill any space, is not very startling. Just how he can be a living person without a body is a bit of a problem, but most Christians have grown accustomed to the idea. In a sense, it is believed that because God is

not anywhere in particular, he is everywhere in general. It is less common, however, for Christians to recognize that the theology holds that since God is timeless, he is everywhen in general without being anywhen in particular.

Here, of course, is an idea that is more Greek than Hebrew, although mention of God as spirit and not body is not uncommon in the Bible. As in so many other matters, you can't make a case here simply on the Bible, because the Bible was written by many persons over a long period of time, and you can find God there both with a body and without a body. But the Hebraic religion has never been anti-materialistic; except in uncommon aberrations, it has never regarded matter as evil or as unreal. But immaterial reality is commonplace in Platonic thought, and for Plato matter is the lowest level of reality, nonbeing, and the source of evil. The gnostics were intensely anti-materialistic, some regarding the God of Genesis who created the material world as the evil demon who tempted Christ in the wilderness. Paul and especially the author of the Fourth Gospel held gnostic beliefs on matter as the source of evil. The Jews, or at least those of the Pharisaic tradition, believed in the resurrection of the body—one of the most Hebraic of the inheritances of Christianity—an indication of a positive attitude toward matter. Plato held to the immortality of the immaterial soul, a typical Greek belief. Some Christians, of course, always alert to the possibilities of eternal insurance, believe in both the immortality of the soul or spirit and the resurrection of the body.

But to return to the creed, what about God being without parts? This isn't quite as simple as it appears to be. It is again a Greek idea that shows up in Plato and Platonism. The concept of a God without parts is the notion of simplicity, and simplicity follows from the idea of divine perfection. God's simplicity is his unity and indestructibility. Anything that is a compound, that is, that has parts, is capable in principle of coming apart; anything that has parts is a composition, and whatever is composed can in principle decompose, something unthinkable in discussing God. In the *Phaedo*, one of Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul, an argument that appeals to the Christian theologians, is the soul's simplicity. Being simple, it is by its very nature indestructible and therefore immortal. Plato never lets us in on just how Socrates knows that the soul is simple.

Now what about God being without passions? There are passages in the Bible where God has parts, and certainly he comes through as a being of intense passion. The idea of God as impassive clearly is a Greek element of the theology. It expresses especially the Aristotelian idea that God is pure act, that is, that God can only act and cannot be acted upon. This same conception of God was advanced by Philo and

became a staple of Christian theology. To be acted upon is to be affected by something, to be passive, to have passions. God is in the active voice, never in the passive. For him to be subject to influence would be imperfection. This is a little rough on the believers who want to influence God through their prayers, but it makes good sense to the theologians who probably don't do much praying anyway. Besides, they have ways of taking care of such things—through the trinitarian conceptions, the mediation of the Virgin, or the intercession of the Saints.

Of all the classical descriptions of God, his eternity or timelessness is, it seems to me, the most important. Plato's timeless entities, the universals, were impersonal, but the Christian theologians, of course, regard God as personal. This is their chief attachment to the biblical faith. The basic problem persists of whether it makes sense to hold that a timeless and spaceless entity, which includes the world but is related to nothing whatsoever, can be regarded as personal. This is a difficulty that will not go away. But an even more interesting issue is the endless chain of implication of the concept of God's timelessness. Plato, influenced by Pythagorean mathematics and the absolutism of Parmenides, held that the universals, the absolute entities, being timeless, are also changeless. Nothing happens to them or for them. They are processless, for change and motion or process of any kind involves time. The ultimate reality is absolutely static being. Motion, change, and process are found only in the world known by our senses; the world of thought, the intelligible world, is eternal *being*, never *becoming*.

This problem of being and becoming is a permanent and persistent issue in metaphysics, and it is always present in the discussion of the nature of God. If God is an absolute, static, processless, timeless being, what is to be said for the world, for human history, for human souls, their freedom and moral strivings, their victories and defeats. In classical theology, both the past and future of the world, and the past and future of human beings, are in a constant, timeless present for God. Here is the main ground for the multitude of omnis that define the divine nature—omnipotence, omniscience, and, we might add, omni-indifference—and it is the justification for divine election and predestination.

I have long believed that the key factor in any theology is the question of God's relation to time. Is God eternal in the classical sense of timeless, or is he a temporal being with an active, ongoing relation to a world which is temporal? For traditional Christianity, the eternal God entered into the horizontal stream of time only once, by descending vertically into human history and becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ. But fortunately this has not satisfied some who are on the cut-

ting edge of the philosophy of religion in this century. Now there is an impressive movement in so-called process theology that draws on the work of recent philosophers whose thought is oriented to the theory that reality is dynamic, changing, always becoming; that the world is unfinished and that life in it is a creative adventure in which new things are happening, things that make a genuine difference to the world. This movement, of which Charles Hartshorne is the recognized leader, shows the influence of such persons as William James, Gustav Fechner, Henri Bergson, and especially Alfred North Whitehead, whose work *Process and Reality* is the most celebrated piece of metaphysics produced in many decades. Here is a philosophy that breaks with the tradition that Christianity inherited from its Greek ancestry, insisting that, in some respects at least, God is not eternal and is not absolute, that he is related to the world of his creation and that things are happening for him as well as for the rest of us. What we do makes a difference to him and to the world.

William James, the most vigorous of all enemies of the absolute, summed it up when he objected to those who constantly remind us that God is in his heaven and all is well. He said, in effect, that in times like these God has no business hanging around heaven. He should be, and is, down in all of the muck and dirt of the universe trying to clean it up.

Latter-day Saints might well have been leaders in moving theology away from absolutism, considering that their prophet made a clean break with the absolutistic tradition. But words like "finite" and "limited" don't go over very well at the pulpit or in the publications of the pious. Good pulpit oratory calls for words that are drenched with piety like "eternal," "infinite," and "omnipotent." Besides, most people don't want to take their problems to a God who has problems of his own. So today, in a conservative and even reactionary mood, Mormonism, which never trusted serious work in the philosophy of religion anyway, is lusting for the linguistic fleshpots of orthodoxy and is turning its back on its own best insights.

Religion does not depend for its truth or worth on the absolutistic metaphysics with which it has been so commonly involved and which has created insoluble problems for its theologians. There is a question of whether it must be involved in rational theology at all, but we should not be too rough on the theologians, even though most of what they come up with is nonsense. Without the theologians, the religious devotees would run wild, as many of them do anyway. Without theology of some kind, which is the rational formulation of religious belief, Christianity would be simply a matter of passion and emotion and would go up in the smoke of unbridled enthusiasm.

In the words of the classical scholar Gilbert Murray, Christianity was born when the Mediterranean world was plagued by "a failure of nerve." In his *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, Murray wrote,

Any one who turns from the great writers of classical Athens, say Sophocles or Aristotle, to those of the Christian era must be conscious of a great difference in tone. . . . The new quality is not specifically Christian: it is just as marked in the Gnostics and the Mithras-worshippers as in the Gospels and the Apocalypse, in Julian and Plotinus as in Gregory and Jerome. It is hard to describe. It is a rise of asceticism, of mysticism, in a sense, of pessimism; a loss of self-confidence, of hope in this life and of faith in normal human effort; a despair of patient inquiry, a cry for infallible revelation; an indifference to the welfare of the state, a conversion of the soul to God. It is an atmosphere in which the aim of the good man is not so much to live justly, to help the society to which he belongs and enjoy the esteem of his fellow creatures; but rather, by means of a burning faith, by contempt for the world and its standards, by ecstasy, suffering, and martyrdom, to be granted pardon for his unspeakable unworthiness, his immeasurable sins. There is an intensifying of certain spiritual emotions; an increase of sensitiveness, a failure of nerve. (1946, 123)

Our world of scientific intelligence is turning away from the central message of Christianity, but we are experiencing a new failure of nerve. Yet notwithstanding the strength of the critical attacks upon it, Christianity is a religion with a remarkably profound meaning for the human spirit, and that meaning is the source of its power of endurance. Whether its foundation is actual event or poetic myth, Christianity as a religion of redemption is the faith that the Almighty God at a moment in time entered the stream of history and suffered the agony of humanity to overcome the tragedy of existence and death to redeem and save his creation. A religion that transmutes tragedy into a victorious faith and brings the multitudes both comfort and hope will survive the onslaught of the cynicism, doubt, and incredulity of a generation whose reason, knowledge, and wisdom now threaten it with disenchantment, anguish, and a kind of cosmic sadness.

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