

CHRISTIANITY

Alex Reichel

This paper is based on a talk in our Healing and Wellbeing series. We have had a series on Comparative Religion so it seemed appropriate to offer a talk on Christianity.

Christianity clearly has the most numerous adherents in Australia and probably throughout the world, so it would certainly be appropriate to speak of it in a series devoted to Comparative Religion. It has many different cultural expressions, and what I would like to home in on is this: "Is there a central reality which defines this particular Way?"

We know that Christianity is intimately bound up with the Sacred Scriptures and I thought I would start with a reading from those scriptures, just to set the stage for what I will talk about later. This reading is taken from Chapter 14 of St. John's Gospel. Jesus the Christ is addressing his disciples and he says:

*" Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Trust in God still, and trust in me.
There are many rooms in my Father's house;
if there were not, I should have told you.
I am going to prepare a place for you,
and after I have gone and prepared you a place,
I shall return to take you with me;
so that where I am
you may be too.*

*You know the way to the place where I am going.
Thomas said, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we
know the way?' Jesus said:*

*' I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.
No one can come to the Father except through me.
If you know me, you know my Father too.
From this moment you know him and have seen him.'*

Now I have a great love of Scripture and it is hard for me to cut off reading it at any point, but I thought it important to home in on

" I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

Christians all over the world sing a lively chorus to this all important line and its context. Christians were originally called Followers of the Way, and it was not until some followers of the Way moved to a place called Antioch that they were first called Christians.

I would like to look at the testimony of a series of people -- not necessarily holy people-- but to those who figure prominently in our literature and cultural history -- to seek from them what it meant to them that 'Jesus is the Truth? What did it mean to them that Jesus is the Way, etc.?'

Throughout the centuries Christianity has been successful to the extent that it has shared a common rationality with thinking men. The Christian faith is consonant with reason. The basic Christian Good News is an unchanging reality, allowing of course for deeper understanding in a process called Incarnational

development. What does change are the touchstones of rationality and this becomes a poignant challenge in the context of postmodernism and 'weak thought' generally.

Christendom was built on a rapport between Jesus' message and Greek/Roman rationality. The Greek Bible of the Seventy, the Septuagint, shows in many places the way in which Greek thought has been caught up in it. We understand that to act unreasonably is contradictory to the nature of God. Is this just a Greek idea or is it always true? Is it culture independent?

In any case the link with Greek thought began to be sundered in the late medieval period with the voluntarism of Duns Scotus. But there was an even earlier commitment to voluntarism in the theology of Islam, beyond the confines of Christianity. For Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any human categories, even that of rationality. Theodore Khoury quotes a work of the noted French Islamist R. Arnaldez, who points out that Ibn Hazm went so far as to state that God is not bound even by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God's will, we would even have to practise idolatry .

(R. Arnaldez, *Grammaire et theologie chez Ibn Hazm de Cordoue*, Paris 1956, p.13)

Pope Benedict, in quoting Arnaldez in his Regensburg address, was careful to point out that comparable positions exist in the theology of the late Middle Ages. Later developments of Duns Scotus' voluntarism led to the claim that we can only know God's *voluntas ordinata* . Beyond this is the realm of God's freedom, in virtue of which he could have done the opposite of everything he has actually done (cf. Ibn Hazm) and this might even lead to the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness.

The Church has always insisted that we worship God in a way that is worthy of thinking beings (cf. Romans 12:1). Between God and us , between the Creator and our created reason there exists a real analogy-- an analogy of proper proportionality-- which is **like** the Creator's reason, which is **not** the Creator's reason, but which is **much less than** the Creator's reason but eminently consistent with the Creator's reason. The will of God follows his reason, his **logos**. The logos became flesh for us. The rationality of the Greek heritage has been purified by integration into the ambit of Christian faith.

The God of **will** has presented a sorry history to Western life. Its manifestation in Nietzsche led to the scourge of Hitler and National Socialism but one cannot fail to see that these had a genesis even earlier.

In any case a radical dehellenisation arose from the *sola scriptura* stance of the Reformers whereby there was an attempt to seek Christian faith in the primordial biblical Word. In philosophy, Immanuel Kant saw faith as independent of thinking, being even more radical than the Reformers. Faith was denied access to the real world altogether. Voluntarism was *de rigueur* in the theology of Calvin.

The second stage of dehellenisation occurred with the liberal theologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the central idea of returning to the simplicity of the man Jesus and his simple message--humanitarian morality. This was designed to render Christianity to be harmonious with modern reason which the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment had foisted on the *body cultural*. This meant that Trinity and Christ's divinity had disappeared but Christianity could now take its place within the university. Christianity could then claim a history and a science.

The third stage of dehellenisation was apparent when the victorious natural sciences saw no need for Christianity at all. Modernity had read the

uncoupling of Christianity from Greek thought as a good thing. This was seen as merely an inculturalisation, not seen as relevant to the many other cultures that exist. We now have a cultural pluralism in which one culture is as good or as bad as any other.

However the Church can never abandon the relationship between faith and the use of human reason. The miracles and prophecies, signs and wonders which can be experienced, even seen, in the Christian life show the essential consonance of faith with reason. Perhaps the clock cannot be set back by Papal *fiat* but we can work with what we already have. We have a scientific ethos, which, to be true to itself, needs to preserve its boast to be obedient to the truth. In this it is essentially Christian but there is a significant rump of atheistic scientists who want to cling to materialism and mechanicism in the face of evidence. In view of the parlous state of violence and unreason into which the world freed from ethical reason has descended, we need to broaden the concept of scientific reason and its application to deal with realities with which Cartesianism and empiricism cannot deal. The foreshortening of reason by scientific positivism cannot deal with many spiritual phenomena, let alone experience of the divine and those experiences of the real which culminate in the diversity of cultures. Such a subset of reason cannot speak of what actually happens in human cultural experience.

It so happens that we now have an experiential rational scheme which can overcome the deficiencies of scientific positivism and relate directly to those issues which delineate cultures, especially Christian culture. It involves a 'fleshing out' of the Word of God, entering into the context of scripture following an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This involves an act of faith in Christ Jesus, an act of surrender to Christ Jesus by an earnest seeking of the charismatic gifts, particularly the gift of tongues, (See for example, 1 Corinthians Chapters 12,13,14) This occurrence is very enlightening as to the meaning of the surrendered life. The surrendered life is the keynote of living faith with its concomitants of living hope and love. Living faith may, of course, be encountered in different ways, but I can only speak of my own experience. A person who has it can give an account of just when it arrived, as the people I will later mention will testify.

Armed with this insight one sets out to make the Word of God one's home. This involves a scheme which I have called the hermeneutic circle. One 'feeds forward' into the context of the Word with a preliminary understanding and then allowing it to 'feed back' in myriads of ways until the circular motion repeated results in a unity between the knower and the known. What ensues is a more profound grasp of the real.

Since this is an existential rationality it can only be understood by experience. The famous existential philosopher Gabriel Marcel was once lecturing in a great American university and members of his audience kept asking him to define his terms, 'Tell me what you mean by that word', etc. He eventually replied:

"Gentlemen, I know I cannot satisfy your request for scientific definitions but if I had a piano here I would be able to play it for you."

Music may well be an apt medium of explanation. At least the "Aha!" response to the apprehension of truth may be accompanied by shouts of praise and lusty singing!

Take, for example, the testimony of Blaise Pascal, the famous French scientist, mathematician and man of Letters, the author of "*Pensées*". After his death there was found sewn into the lining of his doublet, a parchment known as Pascal's Memorial and the poem called "*Fire*". It describes an event which occurred on 23rd

November, 1654. The poem has a "breathless" quality as if the writer was jumping around with excitement. It reads as follows:

FIRE

*"God of Abraham , God of Isaac, God of Jacob.
Not of philosophers or men of learning.
Certainty, joy, certainty, feeling, sight, joy
God of Jesus Christ
My God and your God
Thy God shall be my God
TRUTH
Oblivion of the world and all outside God
Joy, Joy, tears of Joy."*

Today we would say that Pascal had experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It was certainly definitive of his life thereafter and notwithstanding his significant contributions to the new rationality of science etc. he was regarded as rather strange by his scientific colleagues of the Enlightenment. He had a grasp of the real which they did not.

Fyodor Dostoevsky is one of the great figures of the Canon of Western Literature. In 1854 he wrote to Mme Fonvizina about his personal Credo:

"This Credo is very simple, here it is: to believe that nothing is more beautiful, profound, sympathetic, reasonable, manly and more perfect than Christ; and I tell myself with a jealous love not only that there is nothing but there cannot be anything Even more, if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and that in reality the truth was outside Christ, then I would prefer to remain with Christ than with the truth"

(Quoted by Joseph Frank, 1990, *"Dostoevsky, the Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859"* Princeton U.P. p 160)

This statement of Dostoevsky needs to be understood in the sense that he was humble enough to see that his apparatus for knowing could be defective , in common with the rest of men. However he goes on to state:

"I have seen the truth. It is not as though I had invented it with my own mind. I have seen it and the living image of it has filled my soul forever...
In one day, one hour, everything could be arranged at once. The chief thing is love."

There is a permanence to the Truth of Jesus Christ.

"Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, forever"
(Hebrews 13:8)

The permanency of Love has a special meaning for me in that I have lost my two eldest boys . On their tombstones we have written "Love never ends".

Simone Weil is probably the best woman philosopher ever. A French girl with a Jewish background, her significant period was the second quarter of the 20th Century. She had an immense sympathy for marginalised people. She worked with them, notwithstanding the fact that she had a brilliant doctorate from the Sorbonne. When World War II came to France she joined the Free French in England. Due to severe fasting which she undertook thinking that her compatriots and the poor in France were suffering hunger, she died in England before she was able to witness the triumphant re-entry into Paris by General De Gaulle. She left her Notebooks with the French Philosopher Gustave Thibon, who was one of my favourite authors as an undergraduate. Thibon wrote up much of her philosophy in the style of the "*Pensées*". She almost made it into the Christian Church. Pope Paul VI is understood to have said that if she had made it to baptism he would have canonised her.

On reading George Herbert's poem, "Love" she felt the certainty that Jesus Christ was actually present. She writes: "It was a presence more personal, more certain and more real than that of a human being. Moreover, in the sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses or imagination had any part. I only felt in the midst of my sufferings the presence of Love, like what you read in the smile of a beloved face."

There was another Jewish girl called Edith Stein who had a similar experience on reading the works of St. Teresa of Avila. She did make it into the Church, became a Carmelite nun. She is famous as a philosopher for her book on Empathy in which she built on the insights of Husserl. Being a Christian did not save her from the Holocaust. She died in the gas chamber together with her sister. She is now St. Edith Stein.

During a visit to Denmark I visited the graves of Copenhagen's two famous sons, the Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard and Hans Christian Anderson. They are buried close by one another but apparently they did not get on well together. Kierkegaard was something of a prophet, castigating his fellow churchmen for making a mockery of the scriptures by their comfortable lives. He was something of an eccentric and mothers of little Danish children used to correct them by saying: "Don't be a Søren". Anderson was castigated because his fairy tales were fantasies whereas the scriptures were very real indeed. But Søren understood the central reality of Christianity. On his tombstone he had written a verse by a famous Danish poet and hymn writer, Brorson. The English translation reads:

*"It is so little time
that I have won
still it was quite a struggle
and suddenly gone
now I can rest
in halls of roses
and incessantly
to my Jesus talk"*

Kierkegaard could probably continue to talk about Jesus under wet concrete. Roses are symbolic of Love (cf. St. Valentine's Day)

Hans Christian Anderson was certainly Christian in the intention of his fairy tales which usually carried a wise moral. His tombstone reads, from one of his own poems called "The very old man from 1874":

*"The soul which God created in his own image
is inviolable, can never be lost
Our life on this earth is the seed of eternity
Our body dies but the soul lives on!"*

There is no fairy tale quality to this essential statement of Christian reality. It is a living truth, not a thesis in abstract philosophy.

I have a prayer written by Mother Teresa of Calcutta which practically all that needs to be said about this saintly woman. She writes:

"Dear Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God and my Saviour. I need your love to cleanse me from my mistakes and wrongdoings. I need your light to drive away all darkness. I need your peace to fill and satisfy my heart. I now open the door of my heart and ask you to please come into my life and give me your gift of eternal life. Amen"

*Jesus is my God
Jesus is my husband*

*Jesus is my life
Jesus is my only Love
Jesus is my All.*

Thus we see that utter simplicity of mind and heart is no bar to the achievement of great sanctity and service of Jesus.

My last example comes from a remarkable Australian poet, Francis Webb, who spent the greater part of his adult life in mental hospital. I include it here to illustrate that profound prophesy can come from the most unexpected places. Although I knew some of Frank's family, I regret that I did not take up the offer to visit him in mental hospital. Frank suffered from severe paranoid psychosis and was in a desperate state. Whenever he escaped from hospital he might turn up at a convent seeking asylum or get involved in violent episodes and be brought back by police. A fellow poet, Bruce Beaver, who also spent some time in Callan Park wrote a moving tribute to Francis in his "*Letters to Live Poets, Letter XII*":

"I remembered Swift's fascination with the insane. I whistled "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" outside the grimy walls of Callan Park. Inside-*il miglior fabbro*- the best of us all, chewing bloody knuckles, wet dry, daft as a headless chicken circling in the dust. Where are prayers said for him and the parkside horrors? Some prayed for us, I know. I'm still here partially trying to live detachedly."

One day Frank was outside the hospital director's office. An inmate had given birth to a boy child just five days previously. She and the baby were in the office and the director called Frank in to see it and he was offered a nurse of the baby. The result was to me the most moving poem in Australian literature:

FIVE DAYS OLD
(For Christopher John)

*Christmas is in the air
You are given into my hands
Out of quietest , loneliest lands.
My trembling is all my prayer.
To blown straw was given
All the fullness of heaven.*

*The tiny, not the immense
Will teach our groping eyes.
So the absorbed skies
Bleed stars of innocence.
So cloud-voice in war and trouble
Is at last Christ in the stable.*

*Now wonderingly engrossed
In your fearless delicacies,
I am launched upon sacred seas,
Humbly and utterly lost
In the mystery of creation,
Bells, bells of ocean.*

*Too pure for my tongue to praise,
That sober, exquisite yawn*

*Or the gradual, generous dawn
At an eyelid, maker of days:
To shrive my thought for perfection
I must breathe old tempests of action*

*For the snowflake and face of love,
Windfall and word of truth,
Honour close to death.
O eternal truthfulness, Dove,
Tell me what I hold--
Myrrh? Frankincense? Gold?*

*If this is man, then the danger
And fear are as lights of the inn,
Faint and remote as sin
Out here by the manger.
In the sleeping, weeping weather
We shall all kneel down together.*

The reason this poem brings tears to my eyes is that, for many years, I was involved in a community for many wounded, mentally ill and marginalised folk, some like Frank Webb. Our favourite hymn was "The Old Rugged Cross".

"To blown straw was given all the fullness of heaven"

The 'fleshing out of the Word' restores a rationality consistent with the Word. Living Truth is better by far than abstract truth. Pope Benedict need not fear that the Greek participation in the Christian Word will ever be lost. Some of the most profound and timeless natural truth comes from the Greek patrimony. For example, unaided by Christian revelation, Aristotle arrived at the amazing insight:

"God is Understand, the Understand of Understand"

One wonders why the good Lord withheld from him the sublime Truth of the Trinity. Clearly Christ had to come before the world could grasp its most central Truth. Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, is the TRUTH.