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Early Christianity & Today: some shared questions Transcript

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EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND TODAY SOME SHARED QUESTIONS

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You will have noticed that recently there has been quite a bit of discussion about what the real contribution is of Christianity to Western civilisation, not to mention its contribution to British cultural identity. The current issue is normally phrased in terms of what the importance is of the secular in British life, or Western life: is it true that one of the great contributions to the world of European culture has been a kind of public freedom from, or distance from, religion? But when that is posed as an issue, people begin to speak about the importance of Christian categories and images as having helped to shape all that is most distinctive about European culture, and all sorts of questions begin to arise about the definition of multiculturalism and how far it can go.

A lot of this current debate seems to be rather short on an understanding both of Christian history and of the nature of secularism. What I would like to suggest tonight is that we may perhaps begin to get a better understanding of some of these questions by looking at Christianity's formative period during the early centuries of Christian history with a particular eye to those points of tension or newness that arose in relation to the society around it. That will help us get a sense of what was, and perhaps is, different about Christianity, and it may also suggest some rather surprising conclusions about what Christianity has done for Europe.

So, in my reflections this evening, I want to look a little bit at three or four areas of early Christian language and reflection, which stood out against the background of the day and helped to form a new kind of language, about the world, about God, about society and about humanity.

But before embarking on that, let me just issue one word of caution: it is quite easy to think, and there is a school of historians which encourages us to think, that Christianity arrived on the scene and somehow ruined a perfectly satisfactory, enlightened and tolerant classical culture. I paraphrase here, but classical culture is seen to be good at art, good at science, and good at non-dogmatic coexistence. In other words, classical culture is just the sort of culture we would like to have. But before taking that on board uncritically, we need to bear in mind some features of the world into which Christianity came which any modern culture would find rather difficult.

Two of the governing factors in the public life of the Ancient World would be irreducibly foreign to us, and they are of course the institution of slavery, and the complete incorporation of religion into the social order. The late classical world in which Christianity had its origins was one in which slavery was universally taken for granted as a practice, even if sometimes questioned as a theory. It was also a world in which political authority was a religious matter, particularly in the Roman Empire, where the authority of the Roman Emperor was reinforced by the cult of worshiping the Emperor.

Christian faith, notoriously, failed to challenge the first of these effectively. It took it some 1,800 years to wake up to the fact that there was some tension between the Christian gospel and the institution of slavery, and that that was a tension which could actually be resolved by human decisions. It is an embarrassingly long gap.

But on the second factor, the religious quality of political power, Christianity had some very new and very disturbing things to say. I am going to suggest that if you grasp exactly how and why that worked, you may understand a number of other things about early Christianity, about its distinctiveness, and about some of its abiding cutting edge in our own context.

So, I shall begin with a few thoughts about what Christianity had to say about the state and its authority.

In the accounts of the Christian martyrs, especially from the Second Century, one repeatedly comes up against one particular moment when Christians are challenged as to whether they will take part in religious veneration of the Emperor. It is the crucial question. The martyrs are the people who say they cannot. But in some of the accounts of martyrdom, there is a little bit more to it than that.

One text, which comes from North Africa, in the mid-Second Century, depicts the Christians being tried in court as saying that they were perfectly prepared to pray *for* the Emperor, but not *to* him. One of them says, 'We pray for the Emperor. We pay our taxes.' In other words, this Christian was saying, we regard ourselves as loyal to the state and we take part in the processes that make the state work and, what is more, we pray for the good of the state; what we will not do is regard the state as sacred in itself.

This was seen, quite rightly, as an extremely subversive idea. It suggested that individuals, even slaves, could negotiate their relationships with the state, in some degree: they were not obliged to regard it as holy; there was another realm in which decisions might be taken and values and priorities fixed. That tension is reflected in the language that the Church used about itself.

The early Christian community called itself an *Ecclesia*, using for itself the word normally used for an assembly of citizens in an ancient city, the assembly that reflected on public matters and took decisions together, so that, in effect, when the martyrs appear before their Roman judges, they stand for a citizens' assembly over against a Holy Empire. Although that does not instantly create a new kind of Christian politics, it does create a very unsettling element within Roman society. Here are people claiming that, in some area of their lives, they belong outside the holy boundaries of the state and the Empire.

Therefore the state begins to be seen not as a sacred comprehensive system, but as a mechanism for getting things done. The martyrs I referred to a few minutes ago promised to pay their taxes, because that makes society work, but that is the level at which their loyalty is engaged. Their deepest belonging is with the community who are citizens of some other kingdom.

As time goes on, in the early Church this becomes the foundation of a certain distance from political arrangements. When the Roman Empire finally becomes Christian, in the Fourth Century, there are some people who think it is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened, and reinstate the whole idea of sacred authority, associating it now with the Christian Emperor. But there are others, in the Greek and the Latin world, who in effect say: we have been warned; we should not expect too much from any kind of arrangement; there is still an area where God is what matters, rather than the state; and the fate of any particular political arrangement does not dictate what happens to the Christian community.

It becomes most evident in the work of St. Augustine, at the very beginning of the Fifth Century, spelling out this distance or difference. Empires come and go; the community of God's people continues. Empires depend on aggression and control; the community of God's people depends on, to use a famous phrase he picks up from an earlier Latin writer, 'people who are in concord about what they love'.

So into the Western tradition comes an element of political scepticism and critique. Although the Christian Church has again and again allied itself with political power, with hierarchies of more or less compromising kinds, it has always retained, even in the days when people were most uncritical about monarchs, that element of distance. It does not have to be like this; it might be different.

Curiously, the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, so passionately believed in by Anglicans at the beginning of the Seventeenth Century, was something of an aberration in the history of Christian theology. Christians were not averse to blessing Kings, Queens or Emperors, but they were averse to regarding them as, in every situation, inspired or controlled by God.

I believe that the interest in all this is that it is the beginning of Christianity, which itself begins to suggest secularism. There is a difference between living in the community of faith and living in the political community. The two communities engage with one another, argue with one another, and frequently have territorial battles, but the one thing you cannot say is that they are just the same thing. There is an area of public life and social interaction where, quite properly, the institution of the religious community does not dictate, just as there is an area within the political realm that is not answerable only to political authority.

I believe that this has been part of what you might call the 'political dynamism' of the European tradition. It has allowed political authority to be argued about, in a way which would have been very difficult in the Ancient World, and it has said to the state, in effect, that unless the state has within it some element or community answerable to more than itself, that state becomes locked into a totalitarian and oppressive mode. The great paradox is, it seems, that Christianity, having said to the

state 'you are a secular reality,' then also says to the state 'and woe betide you if you think that secular reality is everything, because then you become another kind of sacred monster.'

In our modern setting, we face not a sacred Roman Emperor with incense burning on his altars, but we do face a growing tendency in public discourse to imagine that the only kind of voice really credible in the public sphere is the secular one. Christianity's response to that is not to say every voice in public must be sacred, but to say our history suggests that there is a healthy argument to be had between the sacred and the secular, that public space in a society is not space that has been cleared of all religious illusion or religious authority, it is simply the space where you have the argument.

So in this first respect, I would say that those early generations in which the Christian Church formed its identity not only set a long trail of consequences going in the history of Europe, but also opened up perspectives on our current situation and our current cultural standoffs which are well worth reflecting on. But I want to move on from this to look behind Christianity's early affirmations about itself and the state to ask what it was in Christian belief that helped to make those possible.

Christians believed that they belonged to a citizens' assembly independent of the state because they believed they had been invited freely by God to belong to that community. In other words, they believed that God was free to choose. They believed that God was independent of the political and the material processes of the world, yet capable of engaging with them without being absorbed into them. For the early Christians, God was not a metaphor for cosmic balance, nor was God a sublime intelligence gradually overcoming the resistance of the material world to make something rather tidier than was there in the first place. God was not a supreme mind too exalted to be concerned about particulars. God was, indeed, wholly independent of the world, and therefore free of any conditioning, pressure or manipulation, and also, for that very reason, free to engage with what was created.

It is a fusion of some elements in ancient philosophy, Platonic and Stoic especially, with their appeal to a radically unchallengeable, unchangeable and invulnerable reality behind all appearances, with the dramatic narratives of Jewish scripture, the narratives of a God independent, free and engaged with human history. That was a very explosive and a very difficult marriage, which came quite near to the divorce courts at several points in the history of Christian theology, and yet somehow has survived those stresses. What it is not is simply the triumph of classical philosophy over the Bible, as some textbooks will still tell you. This Christian view of God is a bold and extremely risky attempt to hold together a conviction about the absolute and unchangeable with a conviction about the primacy of liberty and of love, love which, because it is free, is capable of engaging with what is completely different from itself.

There is a fascinating and very suggestive passage in the writings of one Second Century Christian thinker, who says: 'We frequently imagine love in terms that are really about love for what is like us - love is natural sympathy; and yet, when we think about God,' he goes on, 'we have to imagine a love that has nothing to do with natural sympathy, because we are not like God. God is as different from the world as could be, and yet, God is engaged with us in love. Therefore, the way in which we, as human beings, try to live out our love has to be in terms of an attitude to the stranger and the other. That is not based on natural sympathy and easy affinity.'

In that explosive and difficult marriage, as I have called it, of philosophy and the Bible, two of the most characteristic doctrines of Christianity began to take shape: the doctrine of the Trinity, whereby God's love and freedom are eternally exercised, never mind the world, in some kind of mutual flow of giving and receiving, for which we use the powerful, unavoidable, but still questionable, language of personal relationship; and secondly the doctrine of Creation, whereby the world exists because God decided it would and not because He had to make it, because He felt lonely, because He needed the world to complete His own being or because He found unformed matter lying around and thought it would be a good idea to make something nicer. What is around us is because the God of eternal free love has elected that there should be a world, and having made a world out of that causeless love, He has no reason to stop loving it.

I have called it an explosive and a difficult mixture, and so it is, but it remains, in a more contemporary context, a distinctive and difficult set of doctrines. In the modern world of spiritualities it means that Christians still want to position themselves over against certain views of the sacred or the holy. They want to position themselves over against an impersonal view of the Divine, whereby the Divine is just a name for the totality of order and meaning in the universe. The Christian would disagree with that and say that God is beyond that and free of that. God is not another name for any aspect of the universe we know. Yet, Christianity would also want to position itself against a religious sensibility which thinks of God simply as a hugely inflated version of the human ego. So much about the human ego is not about either liberty or love, and so if we try to think of God in something like personal terms, we have the great challenge of thinking away what we mean by selfhood.

So within a world of competing spiritualities, Christianity seeks to hold together certain perspectives that other philosophies, spiritualities, and religious traditions, in various ways, want to hold apart. Christianity remains committed to the absoluteness of God. God is not an item in any list, a member of any series, and yet, the only way we can satisfactorily find of talking about God is in terms of what we have to regard as personal qualities, such as love.

But one further consequence of this is worth mentioning at this point: God has made a world out of His absolute liberty, we say. But God is not simply absolute liberty; God is absolute consistency. God's unchangeable nature means that what He does He does coherently, without being diverted, which is one of the foundations for regarding the world itself as making coherent sense.

This was not a discovery of early Christianity. As we all know, there was such a thing as Ancient Greek science. What Christianity did though was provide a concept of a world that was both limited and consistent, and without that philosophical structure, it is very difficult to give a rational account of science. This is how we come to our second paradox of the evening: if Christianity is, in large part, responsible for secularism, it may turn out that Christianity is also, to some degree, responsible for science. That is to say: it introduces into the intellectual world a notion of that bounded and consistent reality with which the scientist seeks to engage; it sets out the foundation for that extraordinary act of faith which every scientist, practical or theoretical, still makes; the act of faith that what is true today will be true tomorrow.

But let me, thirdly, return to the question of Divine love. I have mentioned the Third Century writer who insists that Divine love does not depend on affinity. One of the consequences that is drawn from that, in early Christian thinking, is that God is quite capable of loving material stuff. Over against a number of religious and philosophical options on the market in those days, which would have insisted that Divine meaning and material stuff had to be completely opposite, Christianity, with some difficulty and lots of ambiguity, hung on, sometimes by its fingernails, to the idea that the material world was not empty of meaning. Some of the greatest and bitterest struggles in the early Church were over those systems which insisted that the material world had to be a mistake, the result of some inept or malicious heavenly being who was either out to complicate matters or simply incompetent. Christianity insisted that God revealed Divine meaning in material form, in the history of material beings, including material beings like you and me of course.

It was something which was deeply connected with the Christian belief that the centre of all history, and indeed all universal reality, was a human life of actual flesh and blood lived at a particular point - the life of Jesus of Nazareth. It was that conviction which allowed Christians also to say that the background to Jesus of Nazareth in the history of Jewish scripture is also significant and not to be written off because what we call the Old Testament is so often difficult and indeed shocking. Like the rest of us, Jesus does not come from nowhere, and like the rest of us, Jesus is not a disembodied ghost. Jesus has an ancestry; he is made possible by history, the history of the Jewish people. Jesus exists in bodily form and is capable of suffering like us. What changes the world is what happens in its material life, not just in some inner world of consciousness or spirit.

It is a bit strange, in many ways, that some modern commentators and scholars feel the level of sympathy they do for those alternative systems to Christianity often called Gnosticism which the early Church saw off in its first two or three centuries. It may seem strange, and yet, when you pause to think about it, the individualism and the interiority of some of these systems sit very well with many aspects of our contemporary culture. Although people sometimes say we are a very materialistic culture, the truth of the matter is that very often we are, as a culture, afraid of the corporeal, afraid of recognising that our bodies are needy, that our bodies are vulnerable, and we are equally afraid of the corporate, of the idea that who we are might not just be up to us. So maybe it is not so odd that some moderns admire the Gnostics. But without going into too much detail about that, we can at least see how, in that early formative period of Christianity, an affirmative attitude to the material world began to be shaped, and a conviction, as I have put it, that change happens in the material life of the world, not just inside people's heads.

But surely, people may say - and I am moving on to my next subject - surely early Christianity was neurotic about bodies, particularly about sex. Surely one of the things that Christianity contributed to the world in its first few centuries was an attitude to physical aestheticism and self-denial that has left behind it a long and unhappy trail of suspicion and contempt for the body.

There are aspects of that in early Christian language, and there is no point pretending otherwise. Yet, the strange thing here is that, for many of the early saints who practised self-denial in spectacular forms, the reason for so acting was precisely the conviction that the body mattered. You wanted to live out your devotion to God and that meant that you had

to conduct your bodily life in a certain way. You had to turn your body into an effective sign of God. For a great many of the aesthetics of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries, that certainly meant practices which pretty well anybody these days, whatever their theological convictions, would regard as wildly eccentric, not to say pathological.

Yet, the reasoning behind it is not to be dismissed too quickly. As some of the great scholars of the early Church in the last couple of decades have insisted, the saint in early Christianity becomes himself or herself a bodily sign, a marker of divine grace, a place where transforming energy is present in the material world. It is why the relics of the saints and the martyrs became important in early Christian worship, and of course, it connects with that deeply positive attitude to the material world which is focused upon the material sharing of bread and wine in the Christian Sacrament.

So, for all the oddity of early Christian self-denial, the strangeness of the early monastic movement, behind it is the conviction that human bodies mean something. They cannot be ignored and they cannot be written off any more than they can be uncritically indulged. The challenge of a really human life is to make them effective signs of God.

That also connects with the way in which Christians, especially in the early monastic movement, developed ways of thinking about instinct and emotion and about the world of passion, as they called it. They developed ways of understanding those elements in the human psyche that turned you inwards, and the thoughts and the practices that would effectively turn you outwards. The practice of self-examination, the understanding of the varieties of temptation, the very subtle and sophisticated ways in which people mapped out the gradations, the different levels of temptation, this was not just a way of whiling away the long winter evenings in desert monasteries. This was, once again, about creating a life that made sense, that had coherence and continuity, a life that could communicate and that was an effective sign.

The Seven Deadly Sins of traditional Christianity, which are, on the whole, for those who can still remember them, rather a matter of easy mirth than otherwise, began as a short and handy list of the diseases of the mind; not so much things you did wrong, as ways of looking at the world that entrapped you. Greed or pride or lust or suchlike, these were not categories that helped you identify certain actions as forbidden. They were ways of helping you understand where your weaknesses were and the huge variety of ways in which experience in the world could encourage you, as I put it, to turn inwards rather than outwards. And the goal of a life resisting these temptations was not either a static, motionless existence with no feelings, nor a state in which you could say, perhaps rather smugly, 'I've kept the rules'. The goal was harmony. The goal was an understanding of yourself, your instincts and emotions, which allowed you to move in step and in harmony with an intelligent love which sustained you and all others in being.

Once again, if we turn to our contemporary world, we might very well wonder what has happened to the idea of understanding or educating emotion. After generations of what people believe was repression, we have all been instructed and encouraged to come to terms with our emotions and give them free play. We have not been given a great deal of help with understanding emotion and making sense of it in practices that are not selfish or destructive. We have not been given a great deal of help in understanding how there might be a form of freedom found in attunement to a greater reality rather than enslavement to unexamined instinct. In that area of the pedagogy and the discipline, the diagnosis of early Christian generations has something strikingly challenging to say to us in our contemporary culture. It does not encourage us to deny the emotional and the instinctive. It does encourage us to bring the emotional and the instinctive into the circle of light that is reflection and self-knowledge and of course, above all, attunement to that causeless and shocking love poured out upon us by the Creator.

In conclusion, what I have been trying to outline this evening, all too briefly and superficially, is some of those elements in the early Christian world view which, by creating a bit of distance from the Ancient World, its politics and its philosophy, allowed new perspectives on the human, on the material, and on the Divine to emerge. It was a world picture which assumed a universe that you could make sense of, but not fully control. It assumed that that universe existed because of intelligent love, and so it assumed that the universe so created had within it the possibility of intelligent love. It assumed that intelligent love could be realised in time, in history, and could be exercised in the relationships between material beings. It assumed that the world was given, not invented by us, that we were answerable to something more than our own instincts, and answerable also to more than whatever system of power happened to be flourishing at any given moment. It is a world view which, in those terms, I believe remains revolutionary, challenging, and, I hope, suitably worrying.

Alasdair MacIntyre wrote, some decades ago, a book with the clarion call of a title 'Against the Self-Images of the Age'. What I have been inviting you to do this evening is to do a little work in setting some of the self-images of our age - secularism and individualism, sentimental or mythological spirituality, and shrunken and impoverished views of humanity -

against those images which the early Christians lived with. They lived with them in such a way and at such a depth that even death at the hands of their oppressors made sense. They lived in them in such a way and at such a depth that sacrifice and joy became inseparable. Those are not things to be set aside lightly or swiftly.

If we want to understand not only where we are but where we have come from, and not only where we have come from but what we, as human beings, in this kind of universe, might still be, we could do worse than listen to some of our early Christian predecessors.

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