

The Essence of Christianity¹

To talk about the essence of Christianity is especially meaningful in our day. Many people barely know what the Christian religion really stands for. That is because of the many caricatures that Christianity has undergone over the centuries. Mankind has always been out to escape its radical claims by adjusting and accommodating it to the religious ground-motives that first governed Greco-Roman civilization and later modern humanistic culture.

Those attempts at accommodation first saw Greek philosophy wrap itself like a parasite around the Christian tenets of faith. In modern times it has been Humanism's religion of reason and personality that has undermined Christian beliefs by interpreting them in a humanistic spirit. In the eyes of many, the essence of Christianity was reduced to a doctrine of morality: the doctrine of the universal brotherhood of man based on the rational belief in God, virtue and immortality. Christ was recognized only as the ideal man, the exalted example of virtue and self-sacrifice.

As early as the Renaissance the view was propagated, in the name of a so-called universal theism, that Christianity simply represented the highest stage in the development of man's natural religious awareness which is gradually emancipating itself from superstition and magic in order at last to bring to expression in lucid rational form the fundamental beliefs of every religion.

Humanism, which was merely a religion of the human personality, equated itself with Christianity. In its struggle for progress it simply pretended to be developing culture in a Christian spirit. So when toward the end of the nineteenth century anti-humanist forces asserted themselves in the West, many thought that the battle for or against the ideas of Humanism was a battle for or against Christianity.

The confusion became even greater, however, when in recent times anti-humanist currents set themselves up as the defenders of "positive Christianity." Christianity appeared to possess the character of a chameleon. It seemed to speak with a thousand different voices and each time assume a content in tune with the changing spirit of the times.

To be sure, there was continuity in the teaching of the church. But since

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the days of the Enlightenment the church for very many people had lost its former prestige. Increasingly she was criticized for her conservatism and backwardness. And the church herself opened her doors to so-called modernism. The pulpit was used in many ways to propagate the ideas of the Enlightenment. As the influence of this modernism grew, it would not do to uphold the old confession in doctrine and life. The national church in our country, dating from the time of the Reformation, began to crumble more and more. Various groups that wished to remain true to the confession seceded from her and proceeded to form a new denomination which was intended to be but the continuation of the old one.

In our own century the decline in church membership took on alarming proportions—alarming because it was a sign of personal estrangement from the Christian faith. Recent surveys showed that children in the public school had heard about the Bible only second-hand. From cultural considerations, the advocates of public education even began a campaign to reintroduce Bible instruction in the curriculum.

Today we witness the reaction to all this. Faith in reason has been undermined in a great cultural crisis born of historical relativism. In this light, the question, What is the essence of Christianity? acquires special significance. It is not just a theoretical question for which the answer will satisfy mere academic curiosity. As soon as the Christian religion begins to reveal its true essence it will put your entire existence in crisis. At stake is the deepest core of your being. Either you will resist it with your whole person, or you will be shattered under the powerful operation of God's Spirit and you will surrender unconditionally to the gospel.

Those who talk of the Christian religion merely in terms of a theory have never really been in touch with its essence, even if they pass for orthodox.

What then is the essence of Christianity? It is the absolute and radical overturning of all religious standards that man has devised for himself. That is why Christianity cannot be compared to any other religion. It is like a divine lightning bolt that strikes every religious idea which in the course of history has been formed by human beings who have fallen away from God.

The basic theme of Christianity is that of creation, fall and redemption in Christ Jesus.

Creation: that means the radical inversion of the relation between man and God. God created man after His image. What a human being is in the

core of his being he can only know if he knows God who created him. There is not a thing that man can maintain over against God as his own independent possession. Yet man turned the relation around: he created his God after his own image and inquired whether this God satisfied his deepest needs. If it did not, he turned to another religion that promised him greater satisfaction. The measure each time was *the measure of man*—of man who had begun by turning his relation to God upside down.

Christianity teaches us knowledge of God from His word-revelation. He is the Absolute One. There is no power over against Him. We are completely dependent upon Him; not a single atom of our existence is withdrawn from Him.

How did the ancient Greeks relate to the concept of creation? Religious consciousness among them was governed by an unreconciled tension between two motives, one deriving from the older nature religion, the other from the newer culture religion.

In the older nature religion the Godhead was not yet conceived in a specific *form*. The ancient Greeks conceived of God in terms of the process of the constant flow of birth and death, of rise and demise, a process that governs all things that manifest themselves in a fixed form. They saw in this the power of unpredictable fate, which they called *anangke*.

The newer culture religion, by contrast, deified the principle of form, measure and harmony that was embodied in Greek culture. The Olympian world of the gods represented the glowing splendor of Greek civilization.

Now the culture religion tried to adjust the older nature religions to itself and absorb them. This attempt could not succeed, however, because the new religion for one thing neglected the deepest questions of life, the questions of life and death, questions that were central to the nature religion. The Olympian gods were only useful to man so long as he enjoyed health and strength. As soon as *anangke* had determined his death, the gods retreated because they eschewed all contact with illness and death. As well, the culture religion made light of moral standards: the Olympian deities were afflicted with every human vice.

When Greek philosophy arose it was governed from the outset by a fundamental religious theme that brought to expression the unreconciled tension between the nature and culture religions. This basic theme was the relation between form and matter.

The principle of form derived from the culture religion, while the

nature religion provided the matter principle or the principle of formlessness, of the process of constant becoming or flux of all things.

Initially, Greek thought turned against the form principle for religiously colored reasons. It elevated formlessness, chaos, to the status of the divine origin of all things. The birth of forms was expressly called "a breach of justice": it was right and just that everything that exists should perish again.

Only gradually did the form principle gain the upper hand, but not until Greek thought had attempted to purify the culture religion and supply its deficiencies. This was done by conceiving of the deity as the origin of all forms and ascribing to it a rational and moral nature.

This rational god took chaotic matter and *formed* it into a cosmos. As he did so, he was constantly confronted with matter as a self-willed, autonomous factor. On this standpoint there was no room for an act of creation.

"Nothing can come from nothing" is an axiom with which Greek philosophy confronted Christian faith in the days of the spread of Christianity.

Closely connected with seeing God as the Creator of all things is the Christian revelation of the core or root of human existence. Human self-knowledge is entirely dependent upon the knowledge of God. Man lives in the temporal world and his life exhibits a plurality of aspects, a multiplicity of functions. Where does the deeper root of this multifaceted existence lie? In Greek thought this was reason, just as the deity was conceived as absolute reason. But the Greek philosophers had to admit that reason cannot control everything in human life. Accordingly, over against the rational soul they posited the material body as an independent power that constantly tries to draw man down into the sensual world.

Unfortunately, under Greek influence this view was also disseminated among Christian circles.

Yet Scripture teaches us something entirely different. All man's temporal functions, including his thinking, are related to a *religious center*. This is where all one's vital forces are concentrated, namely in a person's *heart*. Scripture also refers to it as a person's "soul" or "spirit" and contrasts it with the *body*, which is a person's entire temporal existence and which receives its directives from the soul.

Not until we have seen this do we begin to understand something of the radical nature of man's fall into sin. In falling away from God, man

turned away from his Creator and fancied he was equal to God, that is to say, to have existence in and of himself.

From this moment, spiritual death entered in, and this spiritual death dragged all of creation along with it. Corrupted in the root of his existence, man did not lose his religious concentration point, but the religious concentration of his functions now took on an idolatrous direction.

Man began to seek his God in things temporal and hence elevated what is temporal to what is eternal.

Directly related to this was his loss of self-knowledge. Where does man look for his I, his selfhood? Some look for it in feeling, others in reason, still others in matter.

But for all these apostate views the divine Word-revelation is a consuming fire. It lays bare the hidden root of our existence and so teaches us to understand the immense responsibility this entails.

They who have turned Christianity into a rational and moral theory have cut out the core and essence of Christianity. If human nature were centered in reason, a fall into sin could not have taken place; it would only have been errors in reasoning. But the faith in reason has begun to totter under the ordeal of the global catastrophes of 1914 and 1939. Reason has turned out to be an instrument that produces altogether different sounds, depending on the tune the hidden player uses it for.

Not reason but religion rules the history of the human race. And owing to the fall into sin, human nature too is pervaded by spiritual death.

From the vantage point of reason, people ask how God can be justified despite this horrific impact of sin's pervasiveness. This is once again a revolutionary inversion of the real relationship. Not God but sinful mankind is in need of justification, and the case is not tried in the court of reason but before the judgment seat of God.

God loved the world He created with His perfect divine love. Man, who according to his divine calling and freedom was to dedicate the entire temporal creation to the glory of God, has corrupted this work of creation in its very root.

God revealed His unfathomable love for us by sending into this world His Son—the eternal Word by whom all things were created—to suffer the eternal punishment for sin in our place. That is to say, God Himself, in the person of Christ Jesus, took upon Himself the shame and curse of the guilt of our sin. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The whole life of Christ, from His birth to His death on the cross, was one road of sorrow and suffering. But He loved His own to the end. In the terrific battle with Satan He won the decisive victory. He brought about a radical redemption because He transformed the creation in its religious root and restored the communion of love with God.

Christ Jesus has said: *"I am the way, the truth and the life."* He is *the way*. There is no other way to God than through Christ Jesus, because the radical guilt of sin cannot be removed except through an equally radical divine sacrifice.

He is *the truth*. Christ Jesus, and He alone, could say this of Himself. He exposed all lies, all hypocrisy, all duplicity. He entered the homes of the despised, the lepers, the pariahs, and spoke the truth to them, full of love and compassion. He showed them that they were utterly lost. They had to embrace Him with both arms if they wanted to be saved. The orthodox Pharisees could tolerate the blinding light of truth as little as the learned Greek philosophers. This gospel was foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews. But it was the only way out of death, unto life.

Christ is *the life*. He became life for us because, moved by boundless love for sinners, he voluntarily suffered eternal spiritual death on our behalf.

After His excruciating pain on Gethsemane and Golgotha, and after three days in the silent tomb in the garden of Joseph of Arimathea, there followed the divine denouement of the world drama that had been set in motion by the fall into sin of the human race.

*Christ ist erstanden,
Aus der Verwesung Schoß.
Reißet von Banden
Freudig euch los! ²*

Through Christ's resurrection, the life of the reborn creation arises from death.

This is God's truth; it is not a figment of the religious imagination. For Christ lives in all eternity. He works every day, even in the horrendous catastrophe of our time. These horrific days, in which the world is in flames from North to South and from East to West, were foretold by

² "Christ is arisen/Redeemed from decay/The bonds that imprison/Your souls, rend away!"
(lines from Goethe's *Faust*).

Christ. All these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

They must come to pass. They are signs of the times. The pervasiveness of sin is death in a thousand shapes and forms.

But Christ watches and prays to His Father who is in heaven. For those who believe in him, the end is the triumph of His Kingdom.

For it is only in appearance that the powerful of the world play an autonomous role in the course of events. God smites and chastises the world because it continues to reject Him and thinks it can do without Him.

But for those who are hid in Christ the temporary trials and threats of death are nothing compared to the eternal bliss that will be revealed to them. In the words of Paul: "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, not height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate me from the love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."