

*A Paper for Post-Modern Religion*

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CHRISTIANS NEED TO DISCARD THEIR FATUOUS ETHICS

The history of ethics is a history of contradiction, not a history of progress.

The criticism of the church as not living up to its teaching does not hit the nail on the head. It begs the question whether it would be a good thing if the church did live up to its own teaching. Over and over again church members have served as an example that for a good cause, wrongdoing is a virtue.

Take, for example, the honouring of Moses as a statesman, law-giver, and leader who led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to independent, orderly, and religious nationhood in Canaan. He was a murderer, but this is not seen as a character flaw because his victim was an Egyptian. Is this reflected in the Canadian passivity over our Canadian peacekeepers baiting a hungry Somalia youth with food, then torturing and murdering him? Christians here seemed little motivated to denounce this. In fact some Christians raise the loudest voices for the return to capital punishment, murder by the state. After all, our Hebrew God sanctioned the killing of the firstborn in every Egyptian household to show favour to the Hebrews. And didn't God send his son to be executed by us, many Christians argue?

The Jewish law said it is wrong to steal, yet the exodus from Egypt was accomplished after the Israelites had robbed the Egyptians of their jewelry, silver, gold, and clothing.

The Hebrews perceived God rejoicing in the destruction of the Egyptians who pursued the escaping Israelites. How many Remembrance Day Services have I attended and ministers read scriptures and thanked God for our soldiers being victorious in killing the enemy. In wartime we still plunder and kill and give God the glory.

The ethics of the New Testament still leave much to be desired. Gentiles are called "dogs"; the Jewish leaders and authorities were falsely charged with blame for crucifying Jesus, when it was the Roman authorities; unbelievers are threatened with eternal punishment in the fires of hell; sickness is the result of moral sin; and one can go on and on. Many Christians vilify homosexuals as perverted sinners. They see the disease of aids as a result of a sinful life.

Today in many churches worshippers are led to "approach" a distant God in fear. Prayers of confession are intoned. Absolution and forgiveness are promised the faithful. And this is done despite the fact that our society teaches us to believe, echoing the teaching of Jesus, to love ourselves so we may be able to love others and act accordingly. Society is trying to teach us that we are

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inherently good and trying to be better, while institutionalized Christianity is telling us that we are inherently bad and trying to be good. The former is uplifting and the latter is demoralizing. If we are all, in good faith, sharing in the realm of God, then where is the need for punishment or repentance? Rather than castigating us for failing to wipe out the bad in ourselves, why does the church not teach us to expand the good, that part of us that is of God?

The church stresses the need to worship. The word worship is from the Middle English worscipe, which in turn derives from the Anglo-Saxon weorthscipe, meaning declaring worth. Should not this be directed toward helping those who worship to develop self-acceptance, realism about oneself and others, and fulfillment? Instead worshippers are told, or given the impression, Christ died for their sins, sins of which they are not even aware, and somehow the dead Christ can do something for them regarding their penchant for sinning.

Jesus was a teacher and a leader. He was a prophet and social revolutionary. He sought to lead people to spiritual enlightenment and to be good persons. He preached that if one in good faith lived goodness, then where was the need for punishment or repentance?

Somewhere in his early writings, C.G Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, remarked that we need to keep the Christian symbolism, which is essential to the health of the soul, but we need equally to discard the Christian ethic.

This is a sentiment that grows on me and threatens to become a conviction.

I could wish for a moratorium on any more Christian preachments asserting what we ought to do, or what we ought not to do, which is worse. For fundamentally, Christianity is a life rather than a system of doctrine. The Christian life should not be understood to mean merely a set of prescribed acts, or even such acts performed from a Christian motive. The Christian life is the act and it is the motive to the act. It is also the experience of God in us, the Eternal in the temporal, that lifts us above ourselves and transfigures our particular acts and purposes.

We must be honest with ourselves and not just live for appearances. We must be whole-heartedly true to the best we know and can become. We may find all our dealings with right and wrong suffused with a sense of relationship to a Moral Reality at the centre. As the writer of the Gospel of St. John represents Jesus as saying to the Samaritan woman at the well: "true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in reality."

The German theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher once remarked that religion is "the sum total of all the higher feelings", and that "like holy music it should uninterruptedly accompany the whole of a person's life."

The American preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick once said: "Religion is like music - it does not need defense, but rendition."

Our churches should employ more forms of poetic, artistic, and dramatic presentation to celebrate the higher reaches of spiritual growth. The liturgy should enable the worshippers to do or to become. This happens by

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the drawing power of the divine, either directly or in manifold ways through our human loves, not from stuffy instructions every week to the effect we should deny ourselves and become selfless.

St. Paul said it well in his Letter to the Romans: "With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him." (Phillips).

What is required of the Christian is a living sacrifice, not a self-immolation; sacrifices of joy when possible, sacrifices of thanksgiving; a genuine manner of conducting ones life. As Paul said it: "Let us have no imitation Christian love."

A complete ethic that one may reasonably hope to live by involves a healthy balance between the self and the sacred, between immediate relationships and a concern for the larger society, between the so-called religious and the so-called secular, between labour and leisure, between self-control and relaxation, between celebration and sacrifice. Indeed, for everything there is a season and a time. I have experienced the happening of Job, the test of Jesus in Gethsemane and Calvary, the joy of seeing the good seed sown and observing it grow and become a harvest.

The splendid thing about the Good Samaritan was that he did not imitate anybody, nor did he follow any prescribed rule. He just did what his heart dictated, and what he had to do. As Phillips translates it, he showed practical sympathy.

We can likewise be as original, as personal, as creative, just as indifferent towards fatuous morality, and be kind, giving, reliable, useful, and impartial.

We must trust ourselves to what we find most deeply true in the best of our own experience. We must follow our deepest insights. To some it will seem like a gamble; to others the victory seems assured. But then, to all of us the choice is the same; we have to make it. We either trust ourselves to the goodness of life and what it demands of us, or we betray life's goodness by withholding our service to it - by refusing it our trust.

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The UNCOMFORTABLE PEW  
and  
the UNCOMFORTABLE PULPIT

Many churches find themselves today in a crisis of definition. How are they to understand the mission of the church in this day and age? Can the church survive as a bland island of serenity or is it meant to be a vanguard of God's people carrying Jesus' words of love and justice into the controversial life of the community? If it is the latter, can they continue to exist with their present definitions of the roles of clergy and laity? Can the gap between the pulpit and the pew be bridged? Can the current activities within the church building be regarded as a worthwhile substitute for active engagement in the world?

To those who will debate such issues there may emerge a new and vital definition of the church and its mission.

It is a question whether the church

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can untangle itself from the process of institutionalization which has so complicated and corrupted its true mission to be the people of God living Jesus' gospel.

Does the church have to die before it can be revived?

For one thing, the church today must consider people's needs for genuine religious opportunity to collectively perform good things. One should be supported in recognizing all persons as children of God, entitled to equal opportunity regardless of material differences as race, gender, wealth and standing. There should be support and enabling to allow those who would be protagonists to work. Creativeness often comes out of controversy, and the church today must not be afraid of debate and dispute. St. Paul left this blunt record of conflict with Peter over the freedom of gentile Christians from Jewish practices: "I had to oppose him publicly, for he was plainly in the wrong" (Galatians 2:11, Phillips). The church today is surrounded by issues serious enough to involve controversy, but little effort is made to deal with them.

Many people will not take a stand on the unjust social issues that confront us as a society, yet no one can escape the responsibility to do what they can to better the situation. By remaining silent one may think they are not lining up on either side of an issue, but, in actual effect, their silence is helping to maintain the status quo.

There is a poem which says: "We are the choice, elected few;/ Let all the rest be damned./ There's room enough in hell for you,/ We won't have heaven crammed."

Recently I was invited to address a

worship service in which the children and youth took part. I was instructed to speak on the youth justice system. Afterwards a well-dressed woman followed me out to my car in the parking lot. She came to my car window and asked how they might attract the "street kids" and youth in general to their services. How can we make them feel at home, she asked? I asked her in turn if she would be willing to come to church in her old clothes and sneakers and sit in the back pew with some of them? Like the rich young ruler she turned sorrowfully away.

We live in a time of equivocation because unalloyed faith has become rare among us. Faith means commitment, the positive answer to life. It is the essence of faith to be affirmative. It sees beyond problems to possible solutions, beyond questions to answers, beyond confusion to dedication of ourselves.

Perhaps Christianity's first protest was the march on Jerusalem on what we celebrate as Palm Sunday. There have been others since. There are not many today. I have wondered if hot drinks and sympathy might be shown to our striking public servants, but in Brantford some citizens complained to the authorities about a by-law being broken when the strikers, their fellow citizens, put small fires in steel barrels to warm their hands. Even the Salvation Army is strangely silent and inactive.

To be a Christian is to be a professional protester. They examine the cause critically and accept it provisionally. They don't march because they want to, but because they know they must. The call of the realm of God will not leave us to be uninvolved.