

Breaking Down the Barriers

by

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*An exploration of and suggested remedies
for the present divisions between the
Church and the secular world.*

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

The Christian Church is in serious decline. Despite some glowing exceptions, it is widely viewed as irrelevant to everyday life and often resistant to progressive thinking. With a few exceptions, churches have become special interest clubs clinging to a world-view incomprehensible to the majority in the secular world outside. Clearly, to locate the reason for this we need to look not in the secularization of society but at the Church itself. A radical re-think is urgently required and patterns of thinking long considered sacrosanct, questioned.

Within the Church, it is generally acknowledged that three factors have shaped it: its source book the Bible; tradition, built up around perceived revelation and experience and, crucially, reason. For long, it has been a given that the revelation discovered in the Bible and the tradition upon which it is built should not be contrary to rational explanation. However, a vast gulf has opened up between what is now known and widely acknowledged about the Bible, and the way it is viewed and applied by Christians. Patently, what can now be seen to be crass and simplistic interpretations satisfying a less-discerning age can no longer do so, and a drastic re-think is called for.

Once the mind-set which so seriously hampers communication with the world outside is broken down and replaced with a more cogent set of ideas, then open discussion can take place and the essential message at the heart of the Christian enterprise can be released. Until this is done, the alienation which exists between the Church and the secular world will continue and worsen. Two activities are called for: an open-minded fresh look at the ideas which obtain within; and a careful look at what is happening in the world outside.

The following is an attempt to outline the task.

LOOKING WITHIN

The Bible and Traditional Views

The Bible is an amazing literary work and probably the most significant set of ancient texts which exist, but it is widely misunderstood. It consists of: some history, nearly always distorted by the personal view of the teller; many myths, parables, metaphors and symbols; a lot of beautiful poetry and well written prose; and crammed with stories of human-life in all its richness, longings, heartaches, tragedies, prejudices, cruelties and failings. Above all, it is a compilation with a particular purpose in mind: it has an axe to grind, a cause to justify and a meaning to attach. Particularly, some writers at least and probably most are aiming to prove that Jesus, the Carpenter from Nazareth turned teacher and healer, was the Christ - the Messiah promised to Israel - now become, through reflection and personal mystical experience, a living reality expressible through image, metaphor and symbol.

Each of the early Church leaders had a mystical, subjective, experience of Jesus, e.g., for Paul he was the one who had delivered him from the harsh bondage of the Jewish law; for John he was the bread and water of life and the light of the world. Meditation on Jesus' death had led to interpretation of it as a sacrifice for sin. For the Church, Jesus had become the *lamb of God*, fulfilling all those sacrifices made in the Old Testament. For Christians, the resurrected Jesus had ascended to some higher heaven above the skies and now reigned as a King on a throne in great splendour, surpassing the Roman Emperors, and thus becoming the supreme Lord to be worshiped. In a pre-scientific and religious age this world-view was very persuasive, and after widespread evangelization - comprised of meaningful engagement through works of compassion accompanied by declaration backed up by open confrontation and discussion - it conquered the world. It was subsumed into the Roman Empire and eventually fashioned and informed European culture. During its long history this so persuasive world-view has had its dark side as well as its good

and all too often has been characterized by oppression and resistance to human progress. As a cohesive package, this world-view has, demonstrably, run its course and, with the knowledge we now have, has become an anachronism. This fact must now be faced, questioned and replaced with something more cohesive.

A Religion For Atheists

“A religion based on the principles that were put forth by Jesus and his original followers would be acceptable to an extremely large number of people. It would provide people with the moral and ethical guidelines needed to attempt to lead a good life, while not requiring them to deny the scientific knowledge that humanity has gained.”

The above is a statement appearing on the web-site ‘Atheists for Jesus’, and it neatly sums up the attractions of the historical Jesus as distinct from the world view set out above. There is a clear distinction between what we know of the historic Jesus and the Jesus manufactured through the imaginative mystical experience of the early Christians. This difference needs to be recognized and the true nature of belief understood. It would seem most Christians, during the acts of worship they share, absorb the rich symbolism suggested while rejecting as fact what the ideas behind the familiar words heard in creed, prayer or Bible reading were intended to mean. Perhaps this is one aspect of the religious laziness we seek to challenge. Certainly, once the ‘world-view’ of the ‘salvation’ package which has accumulated around the figure of Jesus can be recognized as unravelling and not to be prescriptively and universally applied, then it is much more likely that common cause can be made with those outside who can see in the historic Jesus, like the atheists mentioned above, someone whose teaching and example could be followed without going through mental gymnastics or personal epiphanies.

This exercise is a daunting one for Christians, who have assumed without question that the world-view they have believed is untouchable. But, help is at hand. The Bible is clear: 'No-one has seen God at any time'. From any cursory reading of the Bible it is obvious that it consists among other things of the how people in the past thought of, and had mystical experiences of, an entity outside or within themselves. Ideas of God presented within its pages are anthropomorphic in their descriptions.

Paul, who could be passionate about his own convictions of Jesus and ecstatic in his descriptions of his own mystical experiences was, nonetheless, explicit: '...we see through a mirror dimly'. Moses wanted to meet God so that he could tell him a few home truths, and was told that he could not do so. On reflection, God added that maybe he could allow just a glimpse of himself as he hurried past. This is, precisely, how the Bible describes people meeting with God; not by believing in statements about him, but by accident, 'by slant', meeting him/her/it when they are not looking for him, through a mystic, personal glimpse. So, we have Moses and the burning bush, Jacob suddenly seeing the ladder stretching upwards to heaven, the couple on the Emmaus road and Paul on the Damascus road.

If belief in God can be acknowledged for what it is - something taking place within each individual's mind as a personal subjective experience of which systems, creeds and world-views are part - then everyone, inside and outside the churches, can have the freedom to believe (or not) through the mirror or lens of their own consciousness and still be perfectly acceptable, so long as such conclusions do not result in negative consequences for humans, of course. So often, those forthright free-thinkers like the atheists and their web site are felt to be enemies of the Church, when they should be considered as friends willing to expose its very evident failings.

Let us not minimize the importance of this step and the difficulty faced by those from within the traditional Church who are

being challenged to take it. Immersed in the seductiveness of a much loved scenario it is easy to assume that it has to be factually and literally true and prescriptive for everyone.

This biased view has been strengthened over the past century through the fundamentalist resurgence with its more recent manifestation of emotional charismatic Christianity. This latter phenomenon has attracted people by focusing on a mystical Jesus, combining an exalted image of him with an immediately available presence. This kind of worship is usually accompanied by intense levels of emotion, almost invariably stimulated by hypnotic rhythmic music with an insistent African/ Disco beat. This hot-house experience - sometimes accompanied by outbreaks of glossolalia - is accessed through the initiation of a personal spiritual regeneration based on a narrow interpretation of the commonly pursued idea of renewal, changing direction, turning over a new leaf: in Christian terms, being born again – itself a misreading of the story describing Jesus' words to Nicodemus.

Also, fundamentalists of all brands tend to approach moral issues from a narrow legalistic and harsh point of view, based again on a misreading of isolated biblical statements. In the past this attitude has led to a resistance to the abolition of slavery, the support of Apartheid, and now opposes homosexuality.

This is a call for an honest, open and determined effort. Churches who make this step, and there are some, can become inclusive in fact and not just in wishful thinking. They can achieve that which is frequently stated, but manifestly not practised: that the Church exists for those who do not belong to it. This attitude would in no way devalue the richness of the spiritual experience of believers which could then be shared with others who have different spiritual experiences or none. For some, a glorious sunset or the magical effects of a beautiful poem can be an epiphany - and in any case, open discussion about belief and the possibilities of joint action to alleviate human suffering could take place between all people of good will.

LOOKING OUTSIDE

Just as it is very important that the Church gets a new view of itself, so it is very important that it makes real, vibrant contact with the secular world which so conspicuously remains outside of its doors and yet in many ways sets an example of good works and human compassion. Serious consideration needs to be given to what is happening in that secular world.

1. Creation, the Natural World and the Alternative Society.

The church stands, or should stand, for a community based on unselfishness and a way of life which is not just about the 'what's in it for me?' attitude. Mostly, the church-goer is no different from the average unthinking member of the public who tries to ignore the monumental crisis unfolding all around. We are living in an age dominated by consumerism, which persists even in the face of what is probably the worst economic crisis the world has ever known. Furthermore, there is a movement which has sprung up within the last three years - *Transition Towns* - of which the Church needs to be aware. This movement has analyzed the available information concerning the effects of the un-restrained use of fossil fuels, particularly oil, on a planet increasingly seen to be movingly fragile. There is now an overwhelming consensus of scientific expert opinion that human practice has led to a climate change which has resulted in the rapid extinction of species and the slow but sure process of the destruction of the planet through pollution. The percentage of carbon in the atmosphere and in the oceans has now reached crisis proportions. The *Transition* movement is growing rapidly, and has recently been described by a leading theologian as "the most significant social phenomena since the second-world-war". In this respect the church can team up enthusiastically with people like atheist David Attenborough, whose passion for the preservation of our world should be shared by the Church with its belief that the natural world is a creation displaying the glory of God. The Church needs to align itself much

more than it does with its overseas Mission Societies, including many with an evangelical stance, who are totally and burningly committed to the cause of conservation. Exceptions to this can be found among the mostly extreme fundamentalist groups whose focus is on narrow moral issues like homosexuality most of which emanate from the United States. Ecumenically, the *Christian Ecology Link* is growing and deserves support.

2. The Immoral Church

Another barrier which exists between the Church and the secular world is the gap which has opened up between perceptions regarding common morality. So much of the Church's morality has been to a large extent wrongly based on dogma and prejudice rather than reason and human compassion. Also, it is clear that the brunt of the moral fight against the cruelty of injustice, with a few isolated exceptions, is left to those outside. In October 2010, Anne Rice, a well-known novelist and life-long member of the Catholic Church issued this statement on the popular web site *Facebook*:

I quit! in the name of Christ I refuse to be anti-gay, I refuse to be anti feminist, I refuse to be anti artificial birth control, I refuse to be anti Democrat, I refuse to be anti secular humanism, I refuse to be anti science, I refuse to be anti life, in the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen.

This was reported through an interview with the author under the headline of her statement: "The Church is flat-immoral". In less dramatic fashion there is a growing consensus that the moral high ground can no longer be found within the Christian Church. This can be seen most clearly in the way that the Church deals with the big moral questions of our time: sexuality, feminism, abortion, and euthanasia.

For much of its long history the Church has considered homosexuality to be unnatural and a venial sin; in many sectors it still does. The ravings of Bishop Akinola in Nigeria, which encourages much cruelty and discrimination, go largely unchallenged by Church leaders and in Uganda homosexuality is an imprisonable offence. Very few churches have a stated policy of welcome to gay people and the insistence from some church leaders that it is a sin to be repented of has led to much suffering among the gay community. Although the world has moved on there is still discrimination and cruelty; and the Church needs to be much more assertive in condemning such behaviour.

Similarly, a great deal needs to be done to further the cause of achieving full equality and respect for that much abused and inadequately-treated half of the human race – women. Abuses such as unfair treatment, failure to recognize skills and talents and the need to provide adequate provision for a proper sharing of child rearing responsibilities are reported every day. Issues like abortion and assisted euthanasia are routinely viewed from an ideological rather than compassionate point of view. Furthermore, there is apathy concerning the low level of provision available for the most vulnerable people: the extreme elderly in our Nursing Homes, deprived children in public care, learning and physically disabled people and the chronically sick, now often abandoned to the tender mercies of entrepreneurial profit-making enterprises who, inevitably, cut corners.

To find an adequate moral concern about these issues it is usually necessary to look outside of the Church, often to the humanist who does not profess to believe in Jesus. This is where a proper understanding of Jesus is important. In any sifting out of what Jesus really was in history, and what he really said, there can be no doubt that he was, above all, compassionate. Clearly, he cared for the poor, the downtrodden and exploited - the last, the lost and the least - and urged, nay demanded, of his followers that they have a similar passion. There are many instances in the history of the Church, and from some parts of it today, of a caring,

concerning attitude, but this is not as evident as it should be in the witness of the local churches. Priority is most often given to keeping the services going and making sure that 'worship' of a God conceived in very traditional ways is maintained rather than being geared to support those outside who fight for justice. There is a gap between the prophet's, "Let justice roll down like waters", Jesus' words about being merciful and compassionate and concerned about justice (Matthew 23:23-24); and the tepid atmosphere in this direction from most Churches. If the warmth and emotion expended in worshipping 'God' was matched by passion for the exploited, then churches would become campaigning bodies in a way that would connect with those taking the initiative in the community around, and release the energy, now largely latent, through the example and inspiration that can come from the historic Jesus.

THE VISION

What is the kind of Church that adequately reflects the open, inclusive and honest insights of the Bible and of the historic Jesus? It would be one in which inclusion and openness were not just stated, but lived. It would be a Church for everyone, whether they believed or not, and every kind of human search for ultimate meaning and experience, however exotic and odd, would be welcomed within its walls. It would be a centre for the arts: poetry, drama and reading groups would flourish. It would be a campaigning church, gathering together all the local energy for conservation, fairness, justice and selfless caring. It would be the centre of a meaningful, alternative community based on service.

How can this vision be achieved? Perhaps it has to be brought about slowly, inch by inch. But, a start has to be made and this has to be through a concentrated effort towards a better understanding of the Bible, tradition and belief; and a much more participatory attitude towards the outside world. This will mean a fresh realization that the Church consists of people on a journey, who have not arrived, but have a story to tell that needs to be placed alongside of those of other people. This attitude would soon take hold and we would see a people no longer trapped within an outdated dogmatic system, but free to share ideas and fulfil what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

There is much to think about and act upon.

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