

TRRS4010 – CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

1. THE CHRISTIAN PARADIGMS

As at 2013, there are approximately 2.2 billion Christians in the world. This makes Christianity the religion with the largest number of adherents. The religion is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ as recounted in the New Testament as well as on the theological reflection of Christians over the course of the two thousand years or so since Jesus' death. Thus Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God, fully divine and fully human, whose life, death and resurrection served to save humanity. His coming was prophesied by the prophets whose words have been recorded in the Old Testament. The Bible itself is held to hint at, rather than express, the main claims of Christian faith. These are expressed in the ecumenical creeds such as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene (Nicaeo-Constantinopolitan) Creed, which outline that God the Father created the world, sent his Son who suffered, died, was buried and was resurrected from the dead, and then ascended into heaven to intercede (pray on behalf of) his followers.

There are a number of different expressions of Christian faith. The three major expressions are the Eastern Orthodox (which is split into a number of different communions), the Roman Catholic and the various expressions of Protestantism. There are a number of other localised expressions of Christian faith which differ in practice and belief from the three major paradigms listed above. These include, for example, the Coptic Church which is based in Egypt and relates most to the Orthodox churches. We will concentrate on the three major paradigms. In examining these, it becomes clear that while they share certain beliefs, their practice, and the teachings which they exalt as of primary significance, are quite different, giving rise to the claim of scholars such as Hans Küng, Stephen Sykes and John de Gruchy, that there is no such thing as 'Christianity'. Instead there are 'Christianities'. It is important to recognize that this claim is based on the belief that the Christian religion is identified by its practice rather than, for example, by its belief. For while there are differences in detail in the belief-systems of the three major paradigms, they are all united around primary theological beliefs, such as the incarnation of God in Christ, who was both fully human and fully divine, who died and was resurrected, and who is the saviour of all humankind.

In Christian teaching, Jesus saves humankind from 'sin'. Sin is fundamentally to be understood as estrangement from God. It is both a state and an account of activity. In other words, human beings exist in a state of sin, i.e. estrangement from God, but they also sin (as a verb), i.e. they do things which are evil. This latter point might concern evil thoughts (such as lust, hate, greed, envy, jealousy, and so on) but it also might concern evil actions (such as adultery, theft, gluttony, murder and so on). It is fundamental in Christian teaching that human beings are

unable to do anything about their situation and that God, in Christ, has done something on their behalf. In some parts of Christianity, this is understood in terms of 'substitutionary atonement', that God in Christ takes on himself the punishment which human beings deserve in order that human beings can be forgiven and then, in light of Christ (and even as God observes human beings through Christ) they can live the forgiven life, the life of God's kingdom, which extends from the present and is not expunged at death but continues into eternity. In Christian theology this has implications for the present and for the future. While sin and death remain in the present, they have been judged by Christ and no longer hold power over human beings. Their final fate will be sealed at the 'eschaton' (literally 'the end'), when a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, will be established, and all that is sinful, all that is harmful, and all that is destructive will be swept away and the creation – the human, animal and plant creation – will be as God intended it to be. Because this is declared to be true, it has implications for the present, where the followers of Christ are able to live lives *as if* this final consummation had already occurred. Thus the followers of Christ are charged with helping to transform the world according to the will of God. This is encapsulated in the 'Lord's Prayer', a prayer recorded in the New Testament as being given by Jesus to his followers and which is usually included in services of Christian worship. The prayer (in its traditional form) reads as follows:

Our Father,
Who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses (sins)
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever.

The clause which prays 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' encapsulates the belief that Christians should work in the present to see the kingdom of heaven established on earth.

The Orthodox Paradigm

The Eastern Orthodox churches (Russia, eastern Europe, Greece as well as Lebanon and Syria) and the Oriental Orthodox churches (Ethiopia, Armenia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran and India) share a number of common characteristics which enable the identification of an 'Orthodox' paradigm. Their claim to 'orthodoxy' is based on the belief of historical continuity with the disciples and apostles and thus with Christ. In this way they safeguard the 'orthodox' or 'true' faith. Each one is basically independent in structure, rather than centralized and hierarchical (like the Roman Catholic Church). The churches are conciliar in structure, based on the New Testament concept of *koinonia* (fellowship). The Orthodox hold to the concept of *paradosis*, a word which means 'tradition' but is held to be a dynamic passing on from age to age of the teaching of Jesus, the disciples and the apostles. A further distinctly Orthodox teaching is that of *theosis*, a process of entering into likeness of, or unity with, God. The Eastern Orthodox recognize the authority of the first seven ecumenical councils of the church. The Oriental Orthodox recognize the authority only of the first three ecumenical councils, and they tend to be 'monophysite' in theology (i.e., that the human and the divine formed one nature in Christ rather than Christ maintaining the fullness of both natures as defined at the fourth ecumenical council, the Council of Chalcedon of 451). It is the 'monophysite' controversy which contributed to the schism between the western and eastern churches in 1054. One of the marks of Orthodox worship is the use of icons, special paintings depicting saints and important figures in Christian history. Through meditating before an icon, the worshipper is able to look through it, as a window, to gain insight into the spiritual realm.

The Catholic Paradigm

The Catholic Church takes its name from a Latin word meaning 'universal'. The name emerged in the early centuries of the church's existence in order to identify the true church, where the same things were universally believed and practice, as opposed to the heresies which were emerging at that time. Its association with Rome developed over time, largely because Rome was the site of the martyrdom of the disciple Peter and the apostle Paul, while it was also the centre of the Roman Empire. The Catholic Church became increasingly known as the Roman Catholic Church after the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The Catholic Church is hierarchical and centralized. The Catholic world-view sees God communicating with the leader of the Church (the Pope) who then communicates with the Cardinals, the Bishops, who then communicate the message to the priests who in turn communicate it to the laity (the ordinary, non-ordained people). The Church also exercises strict control over what is

acceptable teaching in both theology and ethics and expects all to conform to the declarations of its teaching office. This is supported further by the control over the liturgy which, despite being delivered in the vernacular, is the same in every part of the church. Catholicism works within what could be termed a 'sacramental economy' where the seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, penance, eucharist, unction, ordination, matrimony) are the means of mediating grace, while the whole of nature, as the creation of God, holds the potential to express something of that grace. Catholic worship revolves around the celebration of the Mass, where the eucharist is celebrated as a recapitulation of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and where the bread and wine are 'transubstantiated' into the body and blood of Christ. Catholic devotion is not restricted to Christ but includes devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the saints, all of whom act as intercessors for Christians.

The Protestant Paradigm

The Protestant Reformation began as a movement towards reform in the Catholic Church, a movement which had increased in force over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Calls for reform reached their zenith with Martin Luther's protest, on 31 October 1517, against the sale of indulgences (documents sold by the Catholic Church to people, promising them a shorter stay in Purgatory after death, but sold in part to raise funds for the rebuilding of St Peter's in Rome as well as being pocketed by local governors). Gradually the movement broke away from Catholicism, especially after the Council of Trent (1545-63) which rejected all Protestant teaching and renewed traditional Catholic dogma.

There are a number of different streams to Protestantism, including Anglicanism, Lutheranism, the Reformed Churches (Congregational, Presbyterian), Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals. Nevertheless, they all tend to share certain characteristics. Protestantism is usually seen to revolve around the 'five *solae*':

Sola Scriptura: that the authority for the governance of the church and for Christian teaching comes 'from Scripture alone'. Thus the Bible, and not the teaching office of the church or the Christian tradition, is the final authority for Christian faith and practice.

Sola Fide, Sola Gratia: that salvation is by grace through faith. Salvation is not achievable by human effort. It comes as a gift of God's grace which is appropriated (in some form) in the believer when he or she has 'faith'. While this is often seen to be the propensity within a person to believe in the Christian gospel and to trust in God, it is also often seen as a gift of God, given to his people, in order that they might be open to receiving his gift of grace.

Solus Christus: salvation is by Christ and no other. Furthermore, Christ is the only mediator between God and humankind. The Church is not the mediator, nor is the ministry (priests, bishops or Pope). Christ alone mediates the reality and truth as well as the grace of God.

Soli Deo Gloria: that all should be done to the glory of God alone (not for human self-glorification and pride. The Christian should be motivated to glorify God, not to seek her or his own glorification.)

Some other paradigms

Linda Woodhead has identified two particular traditions within Christian history. She characterizes these as the 'transcendent' and the 'immanent'. The 'transcendent' emphasizes the difference between human beings and God, with God being external to his creation and entering into it only through divine condescension. In other words, God is 'other' and thus beyond human experience until such a point when he decides to come into contact with men and women. The above paradigms all belong within this 'transcendent' paradigm. The 'immanent' sees a more direct, immediate connection between God and human beings. In that sense, God is found 'within' human being and experience. There is a tradition of mystics who claim this direct contact but who have tended to exist on the periphery of 'official' Christian teaching.

There is also what could be termed a 'modernist' paradigm. This is the tradition of 'liberal' Christianity which emerged following the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The 'modernist' paradigm emerged initially as an attempt to attract those whose learning had led them away from religion. It was, initially, an aspect of the apologetic task (in this context an 'apology' is a defense of Christian faith). One of the first to undertake this task was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). He moved within intellectual circles in Berlin, but found that his acquaintances had abandoned religion given that philosophy was answering questions about morality and science beginning to answer questions about the origins of human existence (traditionally these two had been tasks fulfilled by religion). Convinced that religion was a good thing, Schleiermacher sought to assert that religion concerned something that neither philosophy nor science could discuss. In his first major work *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799) and his other major systematic volume *The Christian Religion* (1828), he outlined his belief that religion was concerned with 'feeling'. This was not merely concerned with the affections. Instead it concerned the belief that, at the ground of our being, we understand ourselves to be dependent on another for our existence. That 'other' is God. This Schleiermacher defined as 'the feeling of absolute dependence'. Schleiermacher's

contribution was immense. Even those who disagreed with him recognized that he began a new epoch in Christian reflection. His work ensured that the focus in theology would shift from understanding and articulating doctrine to understanding religious experience.

One final paradigm is worth mentioning. This is the phenomenon of the 'New Paradigm Churches' which have emerged over recent decades. These are sometimes referred to as 'emerging' or 'emergent' churches. These are basically independent congregations which do not conform to established frameworks of belief or practice. They emphasize experience rather than dogma and blend ancient forms and rituals with contemporary practices. They usually meet in non-ecclesial contexts (in public houses or schools, for example) and their ethos tends towards the need for people to discover their own spirituality rather than conform to existing patterns.

In summary

Christianity is a diverse phenomenon. There are a number of forms of Christianity which emphasize different teachings and practices. This has given rise to the claim, by some scholars, that there is no single Christianity but a number of Christianities. This begs the question whether or not there is anything which binds them together. In some ways the factor which binds them all together is Jesus and his teaching, his life, death and resurrection. What has ultimately caused the differences in these traditions is how Jesus and his teaching, life, death and resurrection are to be interpreted.

Jesus

In Christianity, Jesus is the 'Christ' (hence the name of the religion itself). The name 'Jesus Christ' is in itself significant. The name 'Jesus' is the Greek version of the Hebrew *Yeshua* or Joshua, which means 'Yahweh (God) saves'; 'Christ' is the Greek word meaning 'anointed' and it corresponds to the Hebrew word 'Messiah'. Jesus Christ is the anointed one through whom Yahweh saves. This places Jesus not only in the context of Christian belief systems but also within the Jewish belief system. The prophets of the Old Testament announced that God would send his Messiah – his anointed one – who would save the nation of Israel and lead its people back to the covenant (agreement) with God. For the Jews, the Messiah has yet to appear. For Christians, Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.

To understand Christianity, then, we need to ask 'Who is Jesus?' To begin to answer that question, we turn to the New Testament in the Bible. The Gospels are our primary source for the life of Jesus. There are four gospels, and while each one shares, more or less, the facts about Jesus' teaching and life, they also

have slightly differing emphases. Thus none of the gospels offer straightforward biographies in the modern sense of the word. Instead, they offer a story which begs a response. They proclaim the 'good news' (εὐαγγέλιον – gospel) about God's actions in Jesus and they ask their readers to respond to this. According to Linda Woodhead: 'The common narrative thread reflects the gospels' common purpose: to persuade that Jesus was no mere mortal, that he was uniquely favoured by God, that he has transcended the limitations of normal human life, and that those who dedicate their lives to him may share in the eternal life he now enjoys'.¹

The gospels attempt to do two things. They initially establish Jesus as a teacher and miracle worker in Galilee. They then move towards their denouement by shifting attention to Jerusalem, where the authorities become concerned at his teaching and conspire to have him executed. They end with the assertion that he was raised from the dead.

The Gospel writers used four things to try to demonstrate that Jesus was the chosen one of God (to be understood variously).

1. His teaching
2. Stories of him performing miracles
3. The account of his resurrection from the dead
4. The argument that his life and death all fulfilled prophecy

It is clear that, for the gospel writers, Jesus had a unique relationship with God. The rest of the New Testament tends to emphasize his divinity. For Paul, Jesus is the 'Lord' who now dwells in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. The Book of Revelation portrays Jesus as the heavenly Lamb who stands by the throne of God and returns to judge the earth at the end of time. Thus, 'Those who compiled [the New Testament] ... were the champions of a version of Christianity that wished to stress the divinity of Christ and the almighty power of the God on whose right hand the Son now sits'.² This was exalted by the Apostle Paul more than anyone else:

For Paul, Jesus is connected to God in a way in which no other human being ever has been, can be, or will be. He is not in the heavens with God because God chose to dignify his humanity – he was with God from the beginning of time and all things were created in and through him. He is, in other words, nothing less than the ordering principle of the universe, the timeless divine wisdom by and through which all things were made, and

¹ Linda Woodhead, *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 10-11.

² Woodhead, *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 15.

the image of that perfect divine humanity that is the goal and purpose of the whole creation.³

This version of Christology (the person and work of Christ) came to dominate Christian orthodoxy in subsequent years. There were other options available during the early centuries, such as Jesus was merely human (later Arianism) or that he was a human being who was particularly exalted by God, or that he was a divine being who came to help others to become divine (Gnosticism). These alternative Christologies were rejected as heresies.

In summary

1. Jesus is central, but there have always been different views about him
2. The gospels suggest a unique connection with God seen in his teaching, his miracles, his resurrection and the fulfillment of prophecy
3. The movement in the New Testament is towards a 'God man' with an emphasis on the divine
4. Paul is seen as instrumental in this with subsequent 'catholic' Christianity rejecting much of the historical and human side
5. Other attitudes have persisted, but the orthodox position has seen Christ as the 'God-man' which was further supported by subsequent councils of the church.

³ Woodhead, *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 20.