

CHRISTIANITY IN AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

by

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Introduction: process in all things

Rarely, if ever, throughout the course of human history have ideas come to individuals in the form of isolated inspiration. Yet, this is often the way important discoveries are popularly represented. Examples are to be found in the stories about James Watt and the kettle, Isaac Newton and the apple. Newton, however, said that if he had been able to see farther than anyone previously, it was because he stood upon the shoulders of giants. Such readiness to give due credit to the work of predecessors and contemporaries is usually found in those who were fortunate to have been born at a time when a significant evolutionary step in the development of an idea had become virtually inevitable. Had it not occurred to that particular individual, albeit one of exceptional talent, it would, sooner or later, have occurred to another. Often names are paired, as in the case of Newton and Leibniz, Darwin and Wallace.

This is not only true of scientific developments. Countless musicians have paid homage to Johann Sebastian Bach, recognizing his influence upon their own music. Mozart, for instance, owed much to J.C. Bach, youngest son of J.S. Bach. Bach, however, carefully studied the works of his contemporaries; he travelled 200 miles on foot to hear Buxtehude and made transcriptions of works by Vivaldi and others.

To draw attention to this is not in any way to minimize the importance of genius. The music of Mozart is as personal and distinctive as his handwriting or his fingerprints; but are not all individuals unique, yet part of, and influenced by, the contemporary development of human society? The extent of human knowledge about any topic at any time must surely be seen as part of an evolutionary process.

The ideas expressed in this essay come from a realization that my attitude towards religion has changed very considerably over a lifetime now extending beyond the biblical norm of three score years and ten. Many factors have contributed to this process, but apart from reading the thoughts of others in books, of special importance is a recognition that knowledge about religion cannot be isolated from knowledge about other subjects.

John Hick says that a religious tradition is not a static entity but a living and growing organism, a history of change, sometimes moving very slowly and sometimes very rapidly. Many people will agree that this is true of any other subject, whilst

making provisos when it is applied to the evolutionary destiny of their own particular religion or religious institution.

An exception to a general rule?

Evolution has been a sensitive topic for the Christian Church, ever since the furore which surrounded the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871).

There are still fundamentalists who regard the Bible as divinely inspired, with Darwin presumably being inspired by Satan. There is much food for thought in the fact that at a time when some more orthodox branches of Christianity are in decline, fundamentalist churches not only retain members but increase their numbers.

The challenge to traditional Christian theology which Darwin's theories presented, however, has been far surpassed in recent years. Acceptance of the views expressed in such books as *The Myth of God Incarnate* and *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* would amount to an abandonment of Christian claims to superiority and to the crossing of a theological Rubicon. What lies across the Rubicon? What will Christianity have to shed, apart from anti-Semitism, an all-male priesthood and imperialistic attitudes to other cultures and religions? Nothing less, these theologians suggest, than making an idol of Christ. That means questioning more dogma than the virgin birth and the physical resurrection, which is as far as the Bishop of Durham goes. The big casualty has to be the claim that Jesus was the unique son of God - a claim he himself never made. That in turn, casts doubt on the Trinity - a notion which Jesus could not have understood. It seems to me that either we accept such an analysis with the clear implication that Christianity simply cannot be an exception to a general rule, or we have to agree that the child who defined faith as 'believing in something you know isn't true' did so with devastating accuracy.

Philosophy is a subject related to religion through metaphysics, which clearly illustrates the general rule of evolutionary development. There is nothing remarkable about any particular name being included in a list which might begin with Plato and Aristotle and end with Russell and Wittgenstein; opinions would vary, of course, about which names to stress as important, or which could be omitted. Difficulties arise, however, with a list which begins with Abraham and Moses to progress through Isaiah, John (the Baptist), Jesus (of Nazareth), Paul (of Tarsus) towards Mohammed and Baha'ullah.

The inclusion of Jesus in such a list may seem incongruous to many Christians; the use of the word Christian in this way is meant to be as if taken from a reference book which gives the language and religion of various countries. Thus, for example, Nicaragua will be Spanish and Roman Catholic, and Egypt will be Arabic and Muslim with a small Christian minority.

There is an additional problem for citizens of the United Kingdom who live in a constitutional monarchy. Their reigning sovereign is Elizabeth II by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Her Other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith. The precise nature of that Faith, however, seems nowadays to be undefined; it depends very much upon whether you listen to David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, or to some other bishop. Although the Church of England may seem to have been singled out for special criticism, similar situations are to be found throughout Christendom.

An alternative to Bibliolatry.

The root of the problem, however, may rest not so much with the special status given to Jesus, but with the special status accorded to the Holy Bible, i.e. bibliolatry.

This useful word has two definitions: (1) excessive devotion to or reliance on the Bible, and (2) an extreme fondness for books. Although it is the first of these definitions which relates to the present discussion, the second suggests that the problem may not be confined to Christianity. Other religions too, whether or not they claim infallibility for their own collections of scripture, do often seem to show an extreme fondness for them. Furthermore, the second definition of bibliolatry forms an essential part of what may at first sight be seen as a digression. Far from it, for it is no less than an account of perhaps the most important factor which contributed towards the evolutionary changes in my personal attitude towards religion.

To offer something more than a reiteration of ideas already well expressed by others, one has to draw upon personal experience. Each of our lives is unique, but although we have many experiences in common, some are unusual. It was quite unusual I think, that at about the age of 40, I experienced a completely unforeseen conversion (and I use this word advisedly as if describing a religious experience) to a love of mathematics. The word 'love' is used here as when referring to a love of music, sport, art or literature.

At the time I did not normally teach maths, but found myself having to do so to some extent because of staffing difficulties. Somewhat to my surprise, I enjoyed the experience, whilst at the same time realizing that there were tremendous gaps in my own understanding. I could find little satisfaction in most textbook explanations, and appreciated the truth of the saying that one of the best ways to learn a subject is to try to teach it to someone else. I saw for the first time that there are many ways of carrying out even the simplest of arithmetical operations. Text books usually manage to give the impression that what you have to do is to learn the way. It is rare indeed to find a textbook which offers alternatives, recognizing that an approach which may seem reasonable to one person (usually assumed to be a child) may not always make sense to another. It can be argued that to present alternatives to a child is to confuse, and that experience has shown that it is best to teach only one method. But if so, the implication has to be that there is in fact only one best way for all to follow; this I thought to be a dubious proposition.

Instead of accepting as axiomatic that authors of text books must know more about the subject than I did, I questioned the validity of 14 being given as the only correct answer to the problem of evaluating $2+3 \times 4$. I could not in all honesty say to a child who had given 20 as an answer: "This is wrong - you have not followed the rule". The child had simply taken things in order as written and had argued that 2 plus 3 is 5, and 5 times 4 is 20. Why should I blame a child for not observing a rule (that when dealing with mixed operations, multiplications and divisions always take precedence over additions and subtractions) which, given arbitrarily without an explanation, must have seemed meaningless?

The text book might have explained that $2+3 \times 4$ actually means $2+3+3+3+3$, or $2+4+4+4$, but could so easily have avoided ambiguity by using brackets. Had two separate examples been given, $(2+3) \times 4$ and $2+(3 \times 4)$, each would have one and only one correct answer. This was just the beginning. I next went on to discover that the usual text book rule about 'turning upside down' when dividing fractions is equally

meaningless to most children and quite unnecessary. With the general reader in mind I have chosen simple examples, but there are many more.

For the first time I saw mathematics as a language - potentially clear and unambiguous, but frequently abused so as to give rise to misunderstandings, feelings of dislike, even of fear and aversion. For the first time I realized that it was possible for me to discover my own way, or ways, how to progress from one step to another.

Text books could be useful to give a sense of direction, but had no authority. One is free to criticize text books and to look for misprints and errors. One is able even to pass judgement and to say that there are some thoroughly bad text books, sometimes with attractive covers. There are, of course, some good text books, and I discovered too, that there are some excellent books about mathematics *per se*.

Sadly, many teachers rely far too much on text books, and lack confidence to devise their own examples. Such reliance often transfers to students; "it says so in the book," or "but that's the rule," is used to justify having made an error. The hallmark of good teaching is seen when students, instead of turning to the back of the book to see if they have got the right answer, check just to make sure the book has got it right.

From such beginnings, I progressed until, years later, I was able to appreciate in the higher branches of mathematics, inter-relationships of awesome complexity. They have, it seems to me, an intrinsic aesthetic beauty which is completely independent of whatever applications may be found for them in science or technology.

There is no need to labor the point that much of what I have said about the teaching of maths could also be said about the teaching of other subjects, including religion. What has been under discussion has been bibliolotry and its alternative.

Nevertheless, I have a feeling that there is something rather special about maths; unlike languages, literature, history and geography, for instance, access to records from the past, whilst helpful, is not an imperative. If, for some reason, all text and reference books became unavailable, most teachers would find it very difficult to continue with their work. Some historians with good memories, for instance, might manage better than others. Maths teachers, however, if really competent, need suffer only minor inconvenience, and might even welcome the experience. Whereas the reliability of a history teacher's memory could be questioned, sound maths teaching rests solely upon agreement between teacher and pupil that "Yes, - it is so."

Consider now what might happen if all teachers of religion, in the pulpits of churches as well as in schools, were to be denied access to their texts. To do so is to realize the true extent of bibliolotry. There would not necessarily be an end to all religious teaching, but the evolutionary nature of religion might perhaps be seen as an alternative to bibliolotry.

During the evolution of mathematical knowledge there were 'dead ends' such as Roman numerals; they are unimportant to continuing development, but it is very instructive to look for the reason why they became dead ends. It is also a very useful exercise to think of parallel examples which may have occurred, or may be occurring during the evolutionary development of religions.

This section began with an account of my 'conversion' to a love of mathematics, but I have never found it easy to identify with the idea of a religious conversion. Jack Mongar's distinction between mystical and conversion experiences is helpful, and I have clear memories of rare peak experiences such as described by him and by Ralph Hetherington. My conversion to an entirely new way of looking at mathematics was something like the Wesley experience, when at a certain time and place something happened and thereafter nothing could be the same as before.

If I could find this deeply satisfying, truly convincing way of seeing mathematics as a search for truth, why not, I thought, look for this same feeling in my attitude towards religion.

The Greek contribution

Christianity may be regarded as having descended, with Judaism and Islam, from the beliefs of an insignificant people of no great cultural or political importance in their own time. While empires rose and fell in the ancient world, the Jews remained a tiny obscure nation, regarded by outsiders as backward, eccentric, and strangely devoted to their peculiar practices and to their rather odd, irritable deity. Is it perhaps a mistake to focus attention upon the fact that Jesus was Jewish, without taking account of other religious influences which were around at the time? If Christianity, as it is today, is to be seen as having evolved over 2000 years, then the fact that strands other than those of Jewish origin have become interwoven in its fabric should be taken into account. As a part of our general Western European culture, as but one of many religions and philosophies, Christianity must have been influenced by many other traditions. The coincidence of Christmas and Easter with pagan festivals associated with the end of Winter and the beginning of Spring can easily be explained. But there almost seems to have been a conspiracy within the traditions of the Christian Church to exclude all references to any non-Jewish achievements of the human mind.

Jesus, as far as we know, did not question the creation stories of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, attributed to Moses. We do not know, for instance, whether or not he was aware that Eratosthenes had, some 200 years BC, calculated the circumference of the earth by observing the angle of the sun's rays at two different places. It may not have been important to him or to the gospel writers. Jesus was concerned with human behaviour, not with the extent of human knowledge about our physical environment.

Nowadays we have begun to realize all too well, in ways impossible to have foreseen then, that the one affects the other.

It is interesting to speculate, if we did have a passage in one of the gospels along the following lines, just how it might have continued: 'And one of the disciples came to Jesus saying, "Lord, we have heard it said that many years ago there lived one called Pythagoras who taught and had many disciples. It is said that he spoke of the true nature of God and taught that the ways of God are to be found in a study of numbers and of music." And Jesus said to the disciple ...'

No doubt this exclusion of any references to other philosophies, unless we count Paul's meeting with Stoics and Epicureans, and the altar inscription TO THE UNKNOWN GOD, has a bearing on the situation later on when clashes between Galileo and the Church, and between Darwin and the Church, became inevitable. This seems to me to be yet another facet of the problem of bibliolatry which says in effect: if it isn't in the Bible, then it either isn't true or it doesn't matter.

Galileo and Darwin did not set out to antagonise the Church. They and other pioneers of science were not anti-Christian, usually far from it. Neither, in more recent times, was Teilhard de Chardin, although his writings were, and perhaps still are for all I know, banned by his own Roman Catholic Church. The universe they revealed did not accord with stories from the Bible. Their theories and ideas might, however, have accorded well with the concepts of Pythagoras.

For anyone beginning to question the intellectual integrity of remaining a member of a Christian denomination, there is the problem of deciding where to go, especially if one has not become a convinced atheist. One need not leave, of course, if there is a likelihood of persuading others to share a point of view by remaining within a church. To do so with a sense of internal mission, or indeed to do nothing, is just as much a part of an evolutionary process as leaving to join some other group of like-minded people.

Since my misgivings came as a result of an awakening appreciation of the aesthetic beauty of pure mathematics, I felt somehow that I must have become a kind of neo-Pythagorean. As a matter of fact, the term neo-Pythagoreanism has already been used to describe various ascetic cults which flourished during the first few centuries AD. These later became a part of neo-Platonism. Both Copernicus and Leibniz felt themselves to be in the Pythagorean tradition, and it is, I believe, not unusual for such ideas as I had begun to have to be stamped as Pythagorean. There is no question of a return to the tenets of Pythagoras himself; it would in any case be difficult to decide which tenets were indeed his, and which were later formulated by his followers. Even the famous theorem which bears his name may have been misattributed.

The importance of this link with the past lies in a continuing search for ultimate truth, undeterred by knowing that not only may it not be found in our lifetime, but that in human terms it must for ever remain unknowable.

Whereas in my case doubts about Christianity began with a changed attitude towards mathematics, for others it may have begun with a study of Greek or Latin. The scepticism of Socrates and the Stoic philosophy as exemplified by Marcus Aurelius may have been the attraction. One wonders whether, if the emperor had made Stoicism the official philosophy, or had Julian the Apostate been listened to, the world might have been spared the problems caused by Christianity.

A musical interlude

It is believed that the entrance to Plato's Academy bore the inscription: 'Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here.' Music and gymnastics were also integral parts of the curriculum. The Pythagoreans under whom Plato had studied had found a close relationship between music and mathematics. To this day it is remarkable how often mathematicians have a keen interest in music, irrespective of their skill, if any, as performers.

The aesthetic appeal in both maths and music is to a sense of pattern which forms part of a grand design, or to an appreciation of contrast, balance, or symmetry. Both have a language which, unlike many others, are relatively free from ambiguity and can be universally understood.

The Christian tradition has made notable contributions to the development of music, rather more so than to mathematics. Patronage from the Church enabled many composers to perfect their art whilst carrying out a religious duty. J.S. Bach is a good example of this, which also raises the question as to whether or not there can be a meaningful distinction between sacred and profane (secular) music.

Bach's *Orgelbuchlein* (BWV 599-644) is a collection of organ pieces, based on chorales which follow the Church year from Advent onwards; it is thus an obvious candidate for classification as sacred. Yet it is an unfinished set of 46 pieces (164 were intended) which Bach had in mind to be used for instruction and pedalling practice; they did, nevertheless, have a liturgical value. The Service of the Church (depending on the

particular shade of Lutheranism adopted), however, gave no opportunity for the performance of a piece such as the Passacaglia (BWV 582). The name must have suggested a Spanish street dance to writers in the late 18th Century. This and much more of Bach's extensive output for organ would therefore have to be classified as secular.

Nowadays, most people who have a high regard for Bach's music would be unable or unwilling to make such a distinction; the title, or the background to the composition, would be of little importance. Far more relevant would be their agreement with the assertion by Zoltan Kodaly that 'music is a source of spiritual nourishment for which there is no substitute'. This is not a claim that music is the only, or the most important, source, but for me it will always have a special place among the arts. The separation of music into sacred and secular categories as though one possessed a spiritual quality denied the other is a nonsense. The only justification for such a classification is that it makes one aware of the reason for the composition. Having made the point, however, it is true that a deep religious faith has been the inspiration for many compositions, no matter how they are classified.

Recent developments in broadcasting and recording music may lead to changes in our perception, of what is sacred and what is profane. In the early days of the gramophone, in many homes it was a serious question whether it would be in order to use this new instrument as a source of entertainment on a Sunday. Perhaps so, it would be said, provided that the records were of sacred music. Not so, for records of military band music. But what if the military band happens to be playing a selection of hymn tunes? Why should the Devil have all the best tunes? Why did Quakers take such a poor view of music until comparatively recent times?

Much more could be written about this topic, but we must not lose sight of more serious matters - this, after all, is only a musical interlude. In conclusion, however, it may be noted that although there no longer seems to be a meaningful separation of music into the sacred and the profane, a new classification has come about: classical, popular, or easy listening (whatever that may mean). The same medium which made our heritage of classical music accessible to all, not just to a privileged minority, has been subject to market forces. It could be said that some of the cruder forms of 'pop' have generated a mass culture which does not augur well for the appreciation of music as one of mankind's highest achievements.

Far more important than a consideration of the pursuit of beauty as part of religious experience, is the question of the role of religion in the pursuit of world peace and harmony.

Towards world peace?

World peace is clearly a religious objective, but the record of the Christian Church as it has evolved over the years is far from unblemished. The gospel message is of love, peace, and neighbourly concern; the evolutionary destiny of Christianity must look towards a vision of world peace above all else. That vision, however, has to recognize that Jesus said: "My peace I give unto you, but not as the world gives, give I unto you" in a way so well expressed in the Christmas sermon given by Archbishop Becket in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. There is a distinction between an outward worldly peace: 'the kingdom of England at peace with its neighbours, the barons at peace with the king, the householder counting over his peaceful gains, the swept hearth, his best wine for a friend at the table, his wife singing to the children', and

an inner peace, unwordly and arising from a deep sense of spiritual awareness; an awareness which does not shrink from the prospect of having to sacrifice worldly comforts, or even to face martyrdom, but depends upon knowing one has fulfilled a destiny.

Universalists believe that such spiritual awareness is accessible to men and women of any religion or none, and that it need not be exclusively Christian.

Christian pacifists believe they have a strong case to argue; for them the gospel is clear enough. There is, nevertheless, more than one dictionary definition of pacifism. There are sincere Christians who would claim to be pacifist, but at the same time accept the theory of the just war.

Throughout its history Christianity has seen crusades of one sort or another. There has been much fighting and quite horrendous cruelties have been perpetrated in the name of Christ. The fighting has been against both those of a different religion, and against those within the Church as it was at a particular period of history, who could not accept a prevailing orthodoxy. It is not a happy story. The episode of the Inquisitions strikes one as particularly unchristian and disgraceful, whether seen from a Protestant or Catholic viewpoint.

Those who claim to have no religious convictions at all must feel entitled to their opinion that religion is a curse, or a very mixed blessing. But it is necessary to qualify such a statement so as to differentiate between an inner personal religion, and an institutionalized form of religion.

Many people do nowadays make a clear distinction between a Christianity which they accept or at least respect, and what, for want of a better expression, may be called Churchianity, which they reject as irrelevant or hypocritical. Included here are those to whom Richard Acland refers when in his book *Hungry Sheep*. He claims that religion is failing today by adhering to an outdated message. Included too are those who have found a more appropriate message in the arms of such organizations as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, or the Schumacher Society. Some people have come to think of these and other similar organizations as quasi-religions.

It is not easy to counter suggestions that Churchianity is largely to blame for the continuing troubles of Northern Ireland. If the term Churchianity is widened to include the institutionalized forms of other religions, the same might be said about conflicts between Christian and Jew, between Jew and Muslim, Muslim and Hindu, Christian and Muslim and so on, and between factions within each of these religions. It may be the case that it is not the religion itself which is the source of trouble; unfortunately, religious, political, racial or nationalistic labels tend to become interchangeable.

Judaism remains a racial as well as a religious phenomenon. There are strong political links within Islam, with a disturbing trend towards fundamentalism and militancy. But those who have a Western European background with a view of Islamic fundamentalism as threatening and unreasonable, need to reflect that perhaps Christian fundamentalism may seem equally threatening and unreasonable to Muslim eyes. In general, Christianity has yet to renounce claims to uniqueness and implied superiority; it still has a sense of mission associated with an imperial past. It is not easy to see these institutionalized religions as factors contributing towards a goal of world peace. The Bahai religion, however, could be seen as such. So too could the mystical sects of most religions.

Any attempt to find ways of reducing tension between religions is bound to take note of overt displays which suggest exclusivity. This will have to include distinctive dress, ceremonial robes, specially prepared food, and rites open only to members of a

particular sect. Outsiders may easily see in such things the implication that only in a certain way is salvation to be found. The symbols may appear to be saying in effect: "Only if you, too, observe these niceties will you be able to share the truth we have found." It is a pity if this impression is given when all that may be intended is to preserve traditions which would be a cultural loss if abandoned. Since we all have different personalities, presumably we have different spiritual needs. With a wide variety of religious practices open to us, which did not imply exclusivity, we would be able to choose whichever ones seemed appropriate at a particular stage of our evolutionary development. The proviso 'which did not imply exclusivity' is, however, all important.

In this context, the antithesis of exclusivity is to be found in a definition of universalism as it is understood by the Quaker Universalist Group.

Universalist groups, even if they are not named so unequivocally as the QUG, or may not recognize themselves as universalist, exist within other religions and within other branches of the Christian tradition.

Groups opposed to a wider acceptance of universalism also exist, but usually prefer to be thought of as traditionalist rather than anti-universalist. Within the Christian Church, perhaps traditionalists need to be persuaded to dwell less upon words from the distant past, but to pay more attention to words from the recent past, such as those to be found in Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*.

Schumacher's writing is very peace-orientated. There are chapters on Peace and Permanence, and on Buddhist Economics. Christians are referred to the Sermon on the Mount as giving precise instructions on how to construct an outlook that could lead to an economics of survival. It may seem daring, he says, to connect the beatitudes with matters of technology and economics. But may it not be that we are in trouble precisely because we have failed for so long to make this connection? It is not difficult to see what these beatitudes may mean for us today:

'We are poor, not demigods. We have plenty to be sorrowful about, and are not emerging into a golden age. We need a gentle approach, a non-violent spirit, and small is beautiful. We must concern ourselves with justice and see right prevail. And all this, only this, can enable us to become peacemakers.'

Natural selection and personal selection

Whether we like it or not, throughout our lives, other people will often look to see what sort of labels we wear. Sometimes a label will be attached to us without our knowing. Sometimes we will be asked to wear a label, either literally or metaphorically. Sometimes we ourselves may make a conscious decision to wear a new label or throw away an old one.

Some labels are difficult, or well nigh impossible, to disown; if one is English or Irish, white or black, male or female, then so be it. Natural selection may have played a part in making us what we are, but there has not been an element of conscious personal selection in the process. If, on the other hand, one is referred to as being a Catholic or a Protestant, a socialist, pacifist, or elitist middle class intellectual, then one is free either to accept or disavow the appellation. In certain situations one is inclined to continue wearing an inappropriate label for the time being, perhaps to avoid giving offence, especially to friends.

Acquired religious labels are exceptionally difficult to discard. Common sense points to there being a fundamental distinction between ethnic characteristics of a

physical nature such as colour of skin, and cultural characteristics such as social class or religion. Yet all too often, no such distinction is made. It is widely held that to be born into a particular religious environment is to become an additional member of that religion.

When, later in life, there is an incentive to be an exception to this general rule, more often than not it is a matter of throwing away the label altogether and declaring oneself to be 'not a religious person', or else exchanging the label of one denomination for another within the same religion. The selection of one major religion as a preferred alternative to the one acquired at birth is a comparatively rare occurrence; usually this happens as a result of a personal encounter with someone of another race or religion.

I once had such an encounter; it did not lead to an exchange of labels, but it was an event as significant in its own way as the 'conversion' to a love of mathematics which was to come much later. It had a profound influence upon my attitude towards Christianity, and led eventually to my being willing to continue to wear a Christian label, only if it was qualified by my wearing an additional universalist label.

In 1942, in what is now Pakistan, but was then a part of the British Raj, a very direct question was put to me by a servant, Mohammed Sadiq. He began diffidently by asking permission to present a problem. He wished to attend the ceremonies which were to take place early next day to mark the beginning of Ramadan. Due to uncertainty about the precise timing, he could not be sure of being back from the mosque in time to bring the early morning cups of tea. Following my assurance that this was no problem as far as I was concerned, he still feared that other sahibs might not be so understanding, and that he might lose his job. I undertook to ensure this would not happen. Duly grateful, he busied himself for a while and then, clearly conscious of the great divide of race, culture, religion, and social status, between us, he asked, "May I have further words with you sahib?" When I said: "Yes, of course", he continued with such questions as: "Are you a Christian?", "When you are at home in England, do you go to a church?", "Now you are here and you have no church to go to, do you still pray to your God?" and so on. Then, after a period of thoughtful silence, came the crucial question: "Can you tell me sahib, your God, our Allah, he is one the same?". Without pause for reflection or a moment of hesitation, I replied: "Yes, I'm sure that he is."

There could have been no other answer; it was as if the words were not my own and had come from somewhere way beyond all normal understanding.

Since then, I have had plenty of time to reflect upon this incident. It is one thing to take part in a discussion group or to engage in philosophical theological debate. It is quite another thing to share the innermost thoughts of a fellow human being on such matters. Sadiq knew, and I knew, that among his countrymen, and among my countrymen, there were many whose reaction would have been very different, leaving aside the fact that for such a conversation to have taken place at all was most unusual. In a moment of truth, when we two were alone, we had recognized in each other a oneness which unites the human race.

The more I've thought about it over the years, the more I've realized the full implications: I had given a simple unqualified "Yes" to the question. Should I have done? What other answer could I have given? Had that same question been put to me under different circumstances, would I have answered "Yes, but ..." And what words would have followed the "but"? For the very first time in my life, I had been made aware that the Christian label I wore was mine on account of birth and not from my own choice. Had our circumstances of birth been different, Sadiq might have been wearing a Christian label, and I a Muslim label.

Many years later there were reasons for me to question whether or not the Christian denominational label I'd been given at birth was the most appropriate one for me to wear. After a considerable period of ecumenical reluctance to wear any denominational label at all, membership of the Religious Society of Friends provided an answer.

Far from marking the end of a spiritual quest, this has given fresh impetus to what I see as my continuing evolutionary development. Not so long ago, I might have given an unqualified "Yes" in reply to the question: "Are you a Quaker?" But now I feel that it is important to add a proviso and to say: "Yes, but I'm a member of the Quaker Universalist Group."

Corollaries and implications

There are two inescapable features of an evolutionary process. One is that there must be differences; where there is uniformity or a static situation, there are no changes and thus no evolutionary developments. The other is that an evolutionary process requires there to be failures; survival and improvement on the one hand, has to be balanced against possible, if not inevitable, extinction on the other.

As examples from the natural world, dinosaurs and the dodo come readily to mind. There are various theories to account for the disappearance of dinosaurs, but mankind alone can be held responsible for the extinction of the dodo and many other species. As part of our consideration of the achievements of the human mind, roman numerals were used to illustrate an evolutionary 'dead end'. Although they have not yet or may never become entirely extinct, they no longer have a part to play in the continuing development of mathematical ideas.

When religions in general, or Christianity in particular, are seen from an evolutionary point of view, similar examples are to be found. Several friends, whose opinions I respect and frequently share, appear to regard orthodox Christianity as equivalent to the coelacanth or to roman numerals.

If only we could simply accept the need for there to be differences, without having to face up to the need for there to be extinctions, there would be no problem at all. But the problem certainly does exist, and is indeed the entire *raison d'etre* for my having written this essay.

This may involve making some difficult decisions, for we may have to choose between:

- (a) Something we really believe in to the extent of our wanting to give it our total commitment.
- (b) Something we do not feel we can support wholeheartedly, but have no wish to oppose.
- (c) Something whose survival threatens (a), and therefore has to be opposed to the point of wishing it to become extinct.

I have difficulties when considering Christian ecumenism. At one time I would have placed it in category (a); later on in category (b). But now that I have no doubts at all that Quaker Universalism belongs in category (a), I cannot avoid at least wondering whether or not there are certain forms of Christian fundamentalism or ecumenism which deserve to find a place in category (c).

The usual aims of ecumenism seem to me to be far too limited - no more than a step along a road. So too, does the movement for the ordination of women.

I believe it is not enough to look forward to a day when all the divided parts of Christendom will come together again, for what then? What about the majority of the people of the USSR or of China? Are they yet to be converted, and if so, converted to what? Are we to offer them the faith of our forefathers, a faith based exclusively upon the Bible? How many ecumenists, especially those committed to evangelism, would offer instead an evolutionary view of Christianity moving towards some form of universalism?

Similarly, I believe it is not enough to look forward to a day when there will be equal numbers of women and men in the ordained ministry of the churches. It is the concept of the priesthood itself which needs to be questioned. How very forward looking were the early Quakers in this respect.

Having said that, however, to try to force the pace of change on those who are our friends and possible allies, could be counter productive. Much patience and tolerance will be required. It is easier to persuade a farmer on arable land to become a vegetarian, than it is to persuade a hill farmer raising sheep and cattle. If ordained ministers are to be asked to put themselves in the position of hill farmers who advocate vegetarianism, they will need to be assured that in a new kind of sharing caring church community which has little time for ritual and ceremony, there will still be a place for their sense of vocation. Pastors in some denominations have already begun to move significantly in such a direction.

A point sometimes made by members of the clergy is that, whilst they personally might be prepared to welcome moves towards demythologization, they have the wishes and well being of their 'flock' to take into account. At risk of appearing to be elitist, they suggest that what may be an acceptable higher form of theology for you and for them, and for an enlightened minority within their congregations, would be very unsuitable, incomprehensible and unsettling, for the majority. This is exactly the same dubious argument which is used by maths teachers who are unable or unwilling to lead their pupils away from textbook bibliolatry - away from meaningless rules towards a genuine understanding.

Sadly, in both cases, the majority have been so deeply conditioned by early experiences, they are very reluctant to do away with their crutches; they have yet to be convinced of their ability to walk without them. If, when I became a Quaker by convincement, I thought of myself as having set aside these metaphorical crutches, then becoming a member of QUG amounted to throwing them away altogether.

Quakerism

It seemed clear enough to me that London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, in 1986, declared itself to be universalist within a Christian frame of reference when it replied to the document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry which it had received from the World Council of Churches. The position of Quakers in the United Kingdom vis-a-vis the rest of Christendom is explained with admirable clarity in the booklet *To Lima with Love*.

However, I share the misgivings of many Friends who see possible ambiguity in more recent statements arising from the decision, in 1989, to join the new ecumenical bodies which were set up to replace the British Council of Churches. I do not question the right ordering of the decision itself, which involves full membership rather than

association which used to be the case. One hopes the right decision was made, but that it does not preclude further discussion as to whether it is the destiny of Quakerism to change Christianity from within the main stream of tradition, or from outside.

Membership of an ecumenical organization can be seen as pointing in one direction, whereas association previously pointed in the other. This important question has been addressed, directly or indirectly, by many writers, by no means all of whom are sympathetic to the views of members of QUG.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that Quakerism is a world-wide movement which has many differences in outlook and emphasis, albeit a very real underlying unity.

With several Yearly Meetings instead of just one, each able to make a corporate statement on behalf of the Society, the existence of different factions is seen more easily in the USA than in the UK. Friends in the UK who are sympathetic towards the aims of QUG will be playing an important part in an evolutionary process, if they help to promote a belief that universalism is the most significant growing point in worldwide Quakerism at the present time. The fact that not all members of the Society share this view is no reason for being reticent about it. The corollaries and implications of the previous section apply not only to religion in general, or to Christianity in particular, but also to Quakerism.

Conclusion

Jan Arriens begins the introduction to his consideration of the place of Jesus in Quaker Universalism by saying that, in his experience, universalism is widely if vaguely discerned within the Society of Friends as an unsettling threat - a sort of disease which, if left unchecked, could gnaw away at the vitals of Quakerism. He goes on to show that it need not be so, and stresses that universalists do not deny the validity of the teachings of Jesus.

As part of the conclusion to this view of Christianity in an evolutionary perspective, it may be appropriate to say that the theory of evolution need not be in conflict with a religious belief. A religious belief can actually be strengthened by putting it into an evolutionary perspective. The theory of evolution does not carry with it an obligation to accept, in philosophical terms, that life has no purpose.

I have found it a refreshing experience to read, and read again without many interruptions whilst doing so, *A Short History of the World* by H.G. Wells. It has 71 short sections: No. 37 is The Teaching of Jesus, and No. 38 is The development of doctrinal Christianity.

Another useful aspect of emphasising the evolutionary nature of Christianity, is that one is drawn towards thinking in terms of evolutionary time scales. On such a scale as that used by H.G. Wells, 2000 years is but a brief moment.

Can we begin to imagine the place of Christianity, or of Quakerism, in a history of human affairs as it may be written in the year 4000 AD? Is it possible that baptism, eucharist, or the question of women bishops, will still be controversial issues at that time?

The mystery of the origins of the cosmos will no doubt continue to exercise the minds of men and women. Perhaps by then, theologians will have accepted something which mathematicians have known for a very long time - that concepts of infinity can be usefully assimilated into human knowledge, provided there is no attempt to define the indefinable.

For the Religious Society of Friends to remain faithful to its inheritance, the future must surely see, to use John Linton's phrase, *Quakerism as Forerunner*, as part of an evolutionary process.

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