

The Faiths of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - Richard Smoley

Handout 4

Taken from the Christianity section of Mr. Montgomery's World Religions Website:
<http://staff.gps.edu/montgomery/World%20Religions/Faiths/Christianity/christianityhomepage.htm>

CHRISTIANITY (Huston Smith)

The Anointed

- Christianity is a historical religion (based less on principle and more on events)
- the most important historical fact in Christianity is the life of Christ, however...
- the emphasis on this event brings about a large puzzle because...
 - • we know absolutely nothing of his physical appearance
 - • we know very little of his historical biography
 - born circa 4 BC
 - grew up in or near Nazareth
 - baptized by John the Baptist
 - had a ministry lasting one to three years
 - crucified near Jerusalem circa 33 AD
- since we know little of where he came from, we must focus on His personality
 - • what he did... what he said... what he was

The Acts of Christ

- most said... 'if God took human form, he would act thus'
- the accounts of the actions of Christ are contained in the Gospels
- though Christ performed miracles, they are not the focus of his ministry
- his disciple Peter put it best... 'He went about doing good.'
- Christ walked without fear or prejudice amongst the 'needy' and did good without pomp

The Words of Christ

- most said... 'If God took human form, He would speak thus.'
- if taken one at a time, Christ's teachings were not new
- if taken as a body, Christ gave them a spirit and an urgency that was never before seen
- Christ's teaching came in two principle forms...
 - • beatitude... a simple fact as a blessing
 - • parable... a story with a hidden, metaphorical meaning
- Christ's teachings are amazing because they defy human logic... (Luke 6:27-38)
 - • do not resist evil, but turn the other cheek
 - • love your enemies and return kindness for hurt
 - • the sun rises on the unjust as much as on the just
 - • the last shall be first and the first shall be last
 - • the path to heaven is narrow and few
 - • do not worry, but have faith that all will be provided
 - • the happy are meek, mournful, merciful, and pure at heart
- Christ's teachings focus on two earth shattering facts...

- • God loves man unconditionally
- • you must accept God's love and pass it on to others
- From Christ's teachings, two points of contention arise among critics...
 - • problem in theory...
 - is Jesus' teaching invalid if prediction of immanent Second Coming was wrong?
 - His teaching is valid because it was based on spirit, not on fact
 - • problem in practice...
 - since teachings give no rule as to how to act, how do we know what to do?
 - teaching based on thought, man must still think, reaction based on case

The Fact of Christ

- most said... 'If God took human form, He would be thus.'
- though his teachings were impressive, more impressive is that Christ lived his words
- Christ's entire life was devoted to humility, self giving, and love
- Christ's concern was not for man to know and worship him, but God
- Christ's reaction was love for him, but his followers' reactions were from the love that emanated from Christ
- Christ ignored all trappings and facts, but the fact of shared humanity

The Crucifixion and the Resurrection

- Jesus' death on the cross could have stopped Christianity in its tracks
 - • another good life (indeed, the best) ends in death and injustice
 - • God either isn't listening to humans or doesn't care about them
- what is miraculous about Christianity is that the crucifixion is the beginning of belief
- disciples believed that Christ's physical body came back from the dead
- others believe it was a rebirth of the spirit and soul of Christ
- either way, the importance of the resurrection for Christians is two fold...
 - • Christ was reborn, so those who believe in Him will be reborn also
 - • Christ's life was goodness, Christ's resurrection was power... therefore God is the eternal goodness that has almighty power
- Christianity asserts that if unconditional love is backed by absolute power over death, then faith and belief in Christ is all that is needed for salvation
- though the disciples believed in the physical resurrection of Christ, modernists say that this strays from the central point of the resurrection

The Good News

- whether or not Jesus' actual body rose from the dead to life, His spirit caught fire
 - • in Acts, the disciples claim to be bathed in tongues of flame and commanded to go into the world to teach and preach the Gospel
 - • Gospel translates as... The Good News
- Though they are important, the Good News is not the body of Christ's ethical teachings
- The Good News is the news of God's unconditional love for man and the salvation that is now available because of Christ's sacrifice
- the meeting places of the disciples were symbolized by the fish...
 - • fish's head pointed to where the meeting would be held

- • letters of fish in Hebrew were anagram... 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior'
- understanding the Christian theology of the Good News
 - • first step is to see the experience for which it attempts to account
 - Good News attempts to account for a people who seemed to have found the secret to life, Christians had an
 - • unlimited wealth of brotherly love
 - • uncontrollable joy for life
 - these two characteristics (love and joy) were produced by a release from three burdens of sin common to man
 - • fear
 - • guilt
 - • ego
 - Christianity claims that the freedom from sin's burden comes from God's pervading and overpowering love as seen through Christ

The Body of the Church

- outsiders first coined the term Christians... Christ-ians... Messiah Folk
- the devout, themselves, we the first to call themselves a 'church'
 - • church... from the Greek 'ekklesia' (those who are called apart)
 - • term illustrates that all power resides in God to mold man to His will
- the metaphor for the church is... the Mystical Body of Christ
 - • by abiding in Christ, the ego vanishes, and Christ acts through you
 - • church members abide in Christ, therefore they are a part of his 'body'
- to continue the metaphor, if the church is the 'mystical body' then...
 - • Christ is the 'head' who leads the body
 - • Holy Spirit is the soul within the body
 - • man is the cells that make the body a physical entity
- through the metaphor of being cells in the body of Christ, we see the origins of...
 - • Christian brotherly love, as you are linked to other cells to make organs
 - • Christian joy, as you can be no closer to Christ than to be a part of Him
- the church, therefore, has a double aspect from this fact...
 - • the church is perfect since it is the dwelling of Christ and the Holy Spirit
 - • the church is imperfect since its physical makeup is man (nature is sin)
- Christianity joins these two to assert that the church's mistakes are due to human error in interpreting a perfect message
- The question then arises...
 - • is salvation dependent upon being a member of the church?
 - • Christianity holds that there are two churches... (both saved)
 - visible church... members of church as an earthly institution
 - invisible church... those who follow the divine light of all hearts

The Mind of the Church

- though physical experience first caused man to react to Christ, the mind soon followed
- theology (mental) is paramount, though modern man focuses on ethics (experiential)
- there are two questions addressed by religion...
 - • ethical/experiential... 'How should I behave?'

- • theological/mental... 'What are the limits for failure?'
- theology is essential because you cannot answer the question of behavior without knowing limits to failure
- Whereas the Gospels and the teachings of Christ addressed the ethics of Christianity, the rest of the New Testament addresses the theology of Christianity
- Christian doctrine addresses the concept of what happened to bring Christ to earth
- We will address this theory through three primary tenets of Christianity

The Doctrine of Incarnation

- insists that Christ was both fully God and fully human
- the creed refuses to entertain a half and half notion, saying that it invalidates the faith
- He must be both, as a bridge must touch both sides... Christ is bridge, God to man
- If Christ were man only, then His life is a way to God, not **THE** way to God
- If Christ were God only, then His standard is impossibly high for man's inherent sin
- If Christ is both fully, then unconditional love is a fact available to and for man
- creed says two things...
 - • Christ as man... provides perfect example by which man should live
 - • Christ as God... God abandoned all He had to save man by living/dying as a man

The Doctrine of Atonement

- this creed has its root in reconciliation, in the recovery of 'at-one-ment'
 - • reconciliation means that an estrangement has been overcome
 - • estrangement is between God and man due to man's inherent sin
 - • Christianity holds that sin is universal, but not necessarily a specific wrong
 - • sin come from the word 'sunder'... estrangement or separation
 - • Christian concept of sin asserts that man is alienated from man and from God
 - • idea of sin shows a discrepancy between the way man is and how he should be
- the advent of Christ says that righteousness is no longer a comparison between men
 - • man must hold himself and his society up against Christ's example
 - • man must realize that we all fall grievously short
- Christ's death and resurrection are the vehicle of atonement
 - • Christ's sacrifice eradicated all ego and assumed all sin and fear
 - • Christ's death removed all sin from man
 - • Christ's resurrection forgave all men of it
 - • Christ died to reconcile man to God

The Doctrine of the Trinity

- insist that God is fully unified, fully one, but also triple in nature
- the idea seems incredibly confusing
- ultimately, the church itself, confesses that the Trinity is a mystery
- the trinity consists of...
 - • the Father (God who is in heaven)
 - • the Son (Jesus, who is God incarnate on earth)

- • the Holy Ghost (who is the Spirit of God)
- the Unity of God is needed to insure simplicity of faith and wholeness in devotion
- distinction is needed to do justice, in the human understanding of things, to the distinct ways in which God makes himself manifest

A Brief History of Christianity

- the Christian church was founded shortly after the death of Christ
- 313 AD... Christianity receives recognition as a religion
- 380 AD... Christianity becomes official religion of the Roman empire
- 1054 AD... the Church splits into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox
- 16th AD... the Church of Rome splits and Protestantism emerges

Roman Catholicism

-there are two concepts central to the Roman Catholic Church...

1) The Church is a Teaching Authority

- • God became incarnate on the earth in order to teach the way to salvation
- • Christ's teachings are the door to salvation
- • it would seem unlikely that His time period was the only one with access
- • therefore, his teachings are eternal, but there must be a body to teach instead
- • this body governs the faithful and is responsible for interpretation of bible
- • the church is Christ's enduring representative on earth
- • the pope is the head of the Church on earth
- • on matters of doctrine and interpretation, the pope is infallible

2) The Church is the Sacramental Agent

- • Christ calls His followers to lead extraordinary lives
- • there is a difference between knowing what to do and doing what you should
- • Man needs help to do his duty, and the Church provides it through sacraments
 1. 1. at birth... baptism
 2. 2. at maturity... confirmation
 3. 3. at human jointure... marriage
 4. 4. at divine jointure... holy orders
 5. 5. at death... extreme unction
 6. 6. to reconcile to God and man... confession
 7. 7. to give strength... communion (transubstantiation)

Eastern Orthodoxy

-Eastern Orthodox Church stands very close to the Roman Catholic Church

-they offer the same sacraments

-differ slightly on the Church as a Teaching Authority...

- • Church can only interpret the ideas addressed directly in the scripture
- • truth reached through majority agreement of Bishops at an Ecumenical Council
- • Church does not allow innovations outside the scripture such as Roman Catholic Church (idea of purgatory, indulgences, etc...)

- • leaves more points open to the discretion of the laity
 - • God's truth is determined through the "conscience of the Church"... the consensus of Christians in general
- Eastern Orthodox Church also has some special emphasis...
- • there is a strong corporate feeling
 - • each Christian is responsible for his individual and our collective salvation
 - downplays selfishness and self serving
 - highlights truth through collective conscience
 - emphasizes strong lay role in the church
 - • encourages members to seek and experience the supernatural side of Christianity as much as possible in the natural world

Protestantism

-from the Latin... pro (for) testes (one who protests)

- • negatively... one who protests against usurpation of God's power by anyone
- • positively... one who protests for God's sovereignty

-Protestantism is not so much a church as a body of Churches

-the main cause for schism was a difference in perspective

-there are two main and distinct features of the Protestant movement...

1) Justification by Faith

- • faith is not just the acceptance of a belief in the absence of proof
- • faith involves the mind... a conviction of God's limitless powers
- • faith involves the affections... a love for and a trust in God
- • faith involves the will... a desire to be an instrument of God's love
- • though the sacraments are valuable, they do not achieve salvation
- • though good deeds are important, they do not indicate faith
- • though the creeds are powerful, they do not create faith
- • the heart must be transformed first to faith, then all others follow from it
- • sacraments, good deeds, and creeds only have meaning through faith
- • man must first be convinced that he is loved, then he is released from anxiety and his actions can be right

2) The Protestant Principle

- • philosophical assertion... do not absolutize the relative
- • theological assertion... beware of idolatry
- • Protestantism asserts that...
 - man's allegiance belongs to God
 - God is beyond history and nature
- • Protestantism demands that man cannot absolutize and put final faith in...
 - dogma
 - sacrament
 - the Church (Papal infallibility)
 - the Bible (Biblical infallibility)
 - personal revelation (the conscience of the church)

- • though these things can be believed and followed, they are neither absolute, nor are they beyond criticism
 - • Protestantism aims to keep the first commandment...
 - Thou shall worship no gods before me
 - • if the above are true, then how can God manifest himself in man's life...
 - personal discovery of God's truth through Biblical account
 - the bible is The Living Word of God
- there are some dangers to Protestantism
- • misconceiving God's word, since it is up to personal revelation
 - protestants recognize the danger here
 - they assert that we must open ourselves to correction of Holy Spirit
 - • there will be difference in view of God and His will
 - protestants acknowledge this
 - they are centralized with 85% in 12 denominations
 - different denominations are not theological but social/national
 - diversity is good