

## THE NEW CHRISTIANITY?

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Most people believe in God. Most people pray, at least sometimes. Yet the Christian Church is dying.

Part of this is a general lack of enthusiasm for belonging to any organisation. Part of it is a disenchantment with hierarchical, authoritarian or sexist structures. But at the root of the decline is a change in belief about God. And almost nobody is talking about it.

A crisis in the churches, Catholic and Protestant, is boiling up underground and is beginning to break through here and there. The imminent 'heresy trial' of the Church of Ireland's Dean of Clonmacnoise is one of the eruptions. It shows clearly that the crisis is about the difference between intellectual expressions of faith and more intuitive ways of expressing it.

It is with the intuitive right side of the brain that people experience God: which is why so many find they are nearer to God in nature. It is with the right-brain that we appreciate beautiful cathedrals, religious art and music. Yet organised worship is left-brain fodder, rational and wordy: prayers, readings, creeds, homilies.

'By love God may be caught and held; by thinking, never,' says the anonymous 14th century writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Here is the crux of the matter: all credal statements about God have come from the analytical side of the human brain, and with that left-side they are now heard by churchgoers and church-refusers alike. Yet the impulse to make those statements must have come originally from right-side experiences of the reality of God.

Over past decades many writers, preachers and teachers have been signalling the need for new thinking. Many clergy and laypeople have privately adapted what they were taught; and go on playing 'The Emperor's New Clothes'. For the sake of others, or for material security, they 'see' what in truth they know is not there. There is a loss of integrity and, for some, feelings of guilt. Faith and worship cannot flourish in such a climate.

The way through all of this must surely be to find new ways of stating the old truths. To find what they were really expressing two thousand years ago, and re-express them in ways not untrue to our present understanding. It is concepts such as the divinity of Jesus, the Fall, Atonement and Resurrection that stop rational and educated people from signing up to Christianity. By clinging to two-thousand-year-old concepts - which we do in no other area of our lives - the Church deters people from becoming followers of Christ and part of a God-centred community.

The prime concept is the divinity of Jesus Christ. To say that 'Jesus is God' is a left-brain, concrete statement. Divine, full stop. Black/white: yes or no? true or untrue? To rationalists, not possible. But looking from the right-side we might say: there is something of God in every human being; in some people there is a lot of God; in Jesus there was so much of God that his followers couldn't see where Jesus ended and God began. So the word 'divine' began to be used of him.

Talk of 'the Third Person of the Trinity' is left-brain thinking, solid imagery, a person. It is difficult not to visualise him/her/it as another being in a nightie. But seen from the intuitive right-

side, 'God's spirit' is not one of three People inside God but another way of saying 'God's influence'.

All those other rigid, rationally worked out concepts -- the Resurrection, the Atonement, the authority of the scriptures, sin and forgiveness -- all can be read in a new way consonant with our present knowledge of ourselves and our world. They can be expressed with integrity, not going against reason but giving value to that which lies beyond mere reasoning, in the realm of art and poetry and intuition.

If these ancient formulations can be let go, and we can allow God be greater than anything we can control with our thinking, then Christians will be truly the monotheists we think we are but have not been. We can get back to the God that Jesus knew, and taught others to know. We will still be Christians, as followers of the teachings and example of Jesus, the Christ, 'the anointed one'. We can be in touch with his spirit because it is part of us and can be related to, just as the spirit of a beloved friend is part of us beyond their death. We can continue to share bread and wine together in remembrance of him, and know his presence in that commemoration. Other sacraments, liturgies, scriptures will come alive because we will be contacting them out of a fresh sense of truth, not with our fingers crossed behind our backs. Christianity will live.

But first we need to talk openly and honestly with each other.

*803 words*

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