

Nick Strobel's notes on "The Soul of Christianity" by Huston Smith

In this last section of the second chapter, we will look at the Christian theology and doctrines that arose in the first millennium after the times of the New Testament community.

The Mind of the Church

The experience of living in the presence of someone whose selfless love, crystalline joy, and preternatural power came together in such a divinely mysterious way drew the disciples to Jesus. Later Christians felt the need to understand this experience. Intelligence rightly deployed would help them to enter the experience more deeply. Although people are more interested in psychology and ethics than in theology and metaphysics, reducing religion to just psychology and ethics denatures religion. Faith's focal attention is on a vision of reality that sets morality in motion, as a by-product almost.

Ritual, belief, and experience, the greatest of these is experience. Theology is the systemization of thoughts about the symbols that religious experience gives rise to. Humans are heart and mind, so the church must be both heart and mind. Now let's look at the foundational points in Christian theology.

The Incarnation

Among the revealed religions, Christianity is unique in joining the human and Divine completely, fully together from the start. Christ is both fully God and fully man—not a part or aspect divine here and another part aspect flesh there, but truly God and truly man all of one essence.

Such a contradiction (or more charitably, "paradox") is analogous to those found in quantum mechanics where matter behaves as both particles and waves and other counterintuitive behaviors reign. When logic and experience clash, it is prudent to stick with evidence, for this holds the prospect of leading to a wider logic, whereas the opposite approach closes the door to discovery. The evidence of religious experience is the intuitions of the soul concerning ultimate issues, not sensory reports that compel assent.

"God" is that which one should give oneself without reservation. In saying that Jesus is God, the church says that Jesus' life is the perfect model for the way human beings should order their lives. Today people find it hard to believe that Jesus was divine but in the early Mediterranean world, it was the humanity of Jesus that was controversial. God was so concerned about humanity to suffer on its behalf. What kind of God is that?

"I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ our Lord, who was *conceived* by the Holy Ghost, *born* of the Virgin Mary, *suffered* under Pontius Pilate, was *crucified*, *died*, and *buried*..." See how hard it comes down on the humanity of Jesus—that is what had to be stressed in the early Mediterranean world. Christ was the bridge that joined humanity to God—"God became man that man might become God".

Questions

1. What does the incarnation of God in Jesus mean to you?
2. Why is it prudent to stick with evidence when logic and experience clash?

The Atonement

The root meaning of atonement is *reconciliation*, the recovery of the wholeness that at-one-ment points toward. How to understand God reconciling the world to himself? The human mind cannot fully comprehend exactly what happens in God's dealings with humanity. To try to understand what happened we need a formula, a teaching tool. Formulae need to be interpreted and many interpretations are possible. Early Christians interpreted "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" in a legalistic sense as a ransom for Adam's sin under God's uncompromising justice. Later in the fifth century Augustine rejected this ransom theory. So how do we understand the reconciliation?

What is meant by "the Fall", the breach between human beings and God? Smith uses Philip Sherrard's writing to describe it. The Fall is a degradation of our God-given awareness of other superior worlds, to forget the symbolic reality of things and to see just their material, physical appearance. In our desire to establish our presence exclusively in this terrestrial world, to be our own masters, to be like our own god, we have reached the point of thinking that the world we perceive with our ego-consciousness is the natural world and that our fallen, sub-human state is the *natural* human state. We divorce the spiritual world from the material world, the uncreated from the created, and assume that we can know one without the other. Those who acknowledge the spiritual realm will view this world as spiritually negative and of no consequence where our salvation is concerned.

What or *who* occasioned the Fall (in the Bible, evil is not an abstract concept, but a person)? Satan, Prince of Darkness, Ruler of This World, the Fallen Angel led humanity away from God with the temptation to "become like God". Under Satan's spell culture is always off-center. We Christians live as resident aliens in occupied territory that served as the landing pad for the incarnation.

Why didn't God just wipe Satan of the map the moment he rebelled? Why let evil remain? This was not an option for God as that would have required keeping, or hoarding, existence to himself. God does not compel surrender, rather God *persuades* us to give up sinning and turn to good; backing up full speed and reversing our tendency to go our own way. God did this by becoming fully human as a demonstration of God's love for us. The most powerful demonstration of the sender's love is to let its receiver know that the sender suffers the pain the recipient suffers. So God incarnated himself, assuming a human aspect in which he could and would suffer, even enduring the most agonizing death in order to break our shells and to let us know that we are loved.

The cross is the central symbol of Christianity. Wherever we see it we know we are in the presence of a Christian person or place of Christian worship. It is God's way of showing how far God would go to show God's love for us. "If this [crucifixion on the cross] doesn't get through to you, there is nothing more I can do to make my point." To any conceivable complaint we can raise, Jesus says, "O yeah. Me too." Every time we abuse the poor, every time we pollute our God-given planet, indeed every time we act selfishly, God dies naked on the cross of our ego.

Questions

1. How do you understand the reconciliation of the world to God?
2. What is "the Fall"? How does it happen in each of our lives?
3. If God is all-powerful, omnipotent, why does evil remain?
4. Why did God choose to incarnate him(her)self as a peasant villager?
5. What does the cross mean to you?

The Trinity

While God is fully one, God is also three just as H₂O can be ice, water, or steam without losing its chemical identity. The idea of the Trinity was anchored in experiences of the early followers, those experiences that would generate the church. The disciples were fully Jewish who affirmed Yahweh and who came to see Jesus as Yahweh's assumption of a human form to enter the world corporeally. And then came Pentecost, which brought the Holy Spirit to the disciple's awareness. If the divine "triangle" has three sides now, it must *always* have had three sides. Love is a relationship and thus love needs others to bestow it on. Love is God's essence and at no point could God have been truly God without being involved in relationship even before the creation of the universe. The Godhead is a society of three divine persons, knowing and loving each other so entirely that not merely can none exist without the others, but in some mysterious way each *is* what the others are.

Questions

1. How can God be three and still be one?
2. How does God being love lead to the idea of the Trinity?

Life Everlasting

The afterlife is a doctrine that many people today struggle with. Modernity assumes that matter is the fundamental reality in the universe, and the consciousness, sentience, is wholly dependent on matter (there must be actively-firing brain neurons for consciousness to exist). This is a mistake: science misread "absence-of-evidence" regarding what lay outside its range as "evidence-of-absence"—that is, as evidence that what it can't deal with doesn't exist. The truth is that consciousness is the foundation of things. Just as matter cannot be destroyed—it can oscillate between corporeality and energy, but it cannot be annihilated—so too with consciousness.

Questions

1. How do you understand the afterlife?
2. In what way is the afterlife essential to your faith or not?

The Resurrection of the Body

The resurrected body is not a resuscitated corpse. What survives death resembles the agent that activates and organizes a physical body. Eternal life is not a prolongation of *this* life, but a life of a higher order than life on earth. A life that, though we can and must begin to enter upon it now, can be consummated only in eternity.

Question

1. How do you understand the resurrection of the body?

Hell

Satan may have seduced a person into its camp, in which case that soul's resurrected body will find itself in hell. The picture of hell as a tortuous burning place is only a metaphor (resurrected bodies are incorporeal and can't burn). The theological definition of hell is total aloneness—not being connected to anyone or thing, like being banished for eternity on a distant planet with no means of communicating with anyone.

What places one in hell is one's *own choice* of self over others in this life so often, so much that one's capacity for empathy, one's bridge to others, breaks down. Satan has the power to seduce but not to compel. He cannot take away our God-given freedom.

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Hell is not eternal for nothing can deprive us of the *imago Dei* that is the foundation of our humanity.

Questions

1. How do you understand "hell"—what is it?
2. Do you agree with Smith that hell is not eternal? Why or why not?

The Virgin Birth

The virgin birth begins Christian theology and the resurrection of the body closes it, but they are both concerned with the body. The virgin birth is one of the formulas we use to try to get a handle on the transcendental plane. Not a physical truth but a metaphorical truth or meaning of God entering the mortal life uncontaminated. "You must become a virgin so that the Spirit of God may fall in love with you" (St Velimirovich).

Question

1. How do you understand the virgin birth? Do you agree with Smith? Why?

Apocalypse: The Revelation to John

Common themes run through all of the messages told by John of Patmos to seven churches: God is aware of the churches' patience and perseverance, but also of their lapses. Brilliant visuals show us what will happen: impending disasters followed by final salvation. The object of these alarming descriptions is God's attempt to knock some sense into the peoples of the world and reverse their stampede toward doom. God's closing of history at the end may seem like a failure of his historical experiment but with a view of the larger picture we see that it is not: a new heaven and a new earth are described.

Question

1. How do you view the Revelation to John: as a description of the future or of something that has already happened?

Conclusion

The Christian story is the story of how "God became man so man might become God" (Irenaeus). It happens individually (sanctity), communally (churches bringing the Mystical Body of Christ to life in their midst), and cosmically. We belong to God and we will be drawn back to God at the end of time. Our natures will be retained but transformed. The final redemption of history is prefigured within history.

Just as the sky enfolds the earth, eternity enfolds history. Even when our minds are on other things, the sky can suffuse our experiences with sunlight or rain, and likewise eternity can break into the moments of our experience with lighting flashes of illumination. History is finite and cannot stand on its own. Eternity is Infinite and periodically breaks into history to remind us that history cannot stand on its own feet. Eternity cannot disclose its fullness or history would vanish in an instant, "The truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind" (Dickenson).

Question

1. What does Smith mean by "eternity enfolds history"?
2. Have you experienced flashes of illumination, glimpses of the Infinite, eternity? Can you describe it?