

III: The Three Main Branches of Christianity Today

In this last chapter of *The Soul of Christianity*, Huston Smith looks at the three main branches of Christianity: Roman Catholicism (focused on the Vatican in Rome and dominant in Poland, central & southern Europe, Ireland, and South America), Eastern Orthodoxy (major influence in Greece, Slavic countries, and Russia), and Protestantism (dominant in northern Europe, England, Scotland, and North America).

In the year 313 the Christian church became legally recognized under Constantine I. In the year 380, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. In 1054, the first great division occurred between the groups that would become the Eastern Orthodox Church in the East and the Roman Catholic Church in the West. Then in the 16th century the Protestant Reformation brought the next great division. Protestantism followed 4 strands: Baptist, Lutheran, Calvinists, and Anglican which themselves have subdivided many times. Now over 900 denominations!

Roman Catholicism

Smith looks at the Church as teaching authority and as sacramental agent.

Authority

The communion of God and man through the history of humanity reaches its apex in Mary, who incorporated in her self the history of her people through God's grace. She freely assented to God's plan by her assent to become the mother of God. Though God is the ultimate "authority", part of God's loving plan, part of God's total generosity, is setting human freedom at the center of the work of redemption. Mary's "yes" to God, her obedience to God, makes her the first and greatest disciple, with an authority transcending all other authority in the Church. The Catholic sees the Church as the Bride of Christ, and sees its type in the Virgin Mary whose virginal consecration of a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience is combined with the tremendous dignity of human motherhood.

The saints are those whose lives become transparent to the light of God in the world today. Saints fully realize the missions given them by God even as the Son is on a mission from the Father. The saints are the glory of the Church, for in them alone the baptismal promises are fully realized. They follow the example of Mary, Mother of God, who was the "perfect yes" to God's call.

Peter was publicly selected by Jesus to be the head of the Church family. He became the first bishop of Rome, the first Pope, the first "Papa" of Rome. The Papacy has the final responsibility for preserving the "deposit of faith", the entirety of Christ's divine revelation that has been passed to succeeding generations in two forms, Sacred Scripture (Bible) and Sacred Tradition. In certain circumstances, the Church through the office of the Pope can state categorically where the truth lies, when it speaks infallibly.

Teachings that Smith highlights are the Church's "preferential option" for the poor, the sanctity of all human life, and the conviction that all of God's creation is good because the Incarnation of God in Christ redeemed humanity and the whole world. The crucifix, with the fully human body of Jesus crucified by the world is the most common symbol in Catholicism. It represents God's boundless love for the world. Only a profound trust in the Resurrection enables one to have faith in God's love even in the midst of

natural and human disasters. It is the authority of the apostolic Church, given by Christ, that enables believers to trust the truths taught in the Bible. Though the Vatican is the Roman Catholic Church's symbol of continuity with Peter, the living center of the Church is found in every tabernacle of the world where, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, Christians encounter Christ's "Real Presence".

The Sacraments

From the twin streams of blood and water out of the pierced side of Jesus come the sacraments of *baptism* and the *Eucharist* (communion). Other sacraments cluster around them: *confession* and *anointing the body as it approaches death* extend Jesus' mission of forgiving sins that first happens with baptism. The sacramental forgiveness of sins enables one to properly or fully receive the Eucharist—taste the delights of heaven come to Earth. In the "standing miracle" of the Eucharist, the bread and wine are actually transformed into the very "body, blood, soul, and divinity" of Jesus Christ.

The sacrament of *Holy Orders* elevates men chosen from the community to live the hierarchical priesthood for the community, to embody/model Christ in a special way for God's people. The priest presides over the miracle of the Eucharist that takes place at the liturgy called the Mass. Christians see a new Temple (to replace the Jerusalem Temple destroyed in AD 70) in the body of Jesus, and it is his body that is the inclusive sacrifice, re-enacted throughout the ages in every Mass in the world.

The sacrament of *confirmation* takes place when any child comes to the age of understanding. The child makes a conscious choice to join the faith community and secures the blessing of baptism by anchoring it in his/her comprehending mind. *Marriage* is celebrated as a sacrament in the Catholic Church. In it, that which is the pinnacle of human love is touched by, blessed, and elevated by the love of God. The relation of Christ to His Church is the model for marriage. Indeed, marriage shares in the very life of Heaven and reveals something of the perfect and fruitful love of Heaven to earth.

The Catholic Church has always recognized the power of God at work outside her visible confines. The Church continues to foster whatever is good and true in any religious tradition and culture, hoping to lead all to an appreciation of the fullness of truth revealed in Jesus Christ and in His Bride, the Church.

Eastern Orthodoxy

Eastern Orthodoxy includes the churches of Albania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Sinai. The Eastern Orthodox Church interprets the sacraments in fundamentally the same way as does the Roman Church. They share with Rome the premise that it is the church's responsibility to ensure that the faith doesn't disintegrate into conflicting claims and chaos and that the Church can be infallible through the power of God.

Unlike the Roman Church, the Eastern Church limits the articles of faith to only those issues mentioned in scripture. The church cannot *initiate* doctrines such as the immaculate conception (the view held by the Roman Church that Mary was conceived in her mother's womb without original sin) and purgatory (which the Roman Church conceives as a temporary abode where souls are punished for sins that have not yet been forgiven).

Where the Roman Church holds that dogmas come through the pope, the Eastern Church holds that God's truth is disclosed through the consensus of Christians generally.

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

This consensus was focused in the seven ecclesiastical councils of bishops that were held before 787 AD.

The Corporate View of the Church

The Eastern Church takes the notion of all Christians being "members of one another" as part of the Mystical Body of Christ more seriously than either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism. Each Christian is working out his or her salvation in conjunction with the rest of the church, not individually to save a separate soul. This comes from Paul's theme of the entire universe "groaning in travail" as it awaits redemption (Romans 8:17-25). Not only is the destiny of the individual bound up with the entire church; the church is responsible for helping to sanctify the entire world of nature and history. The welfare of everything in creation is affected to some degree by what each individual soul contributes to or detracts from it.

Mystical Emphasis

The Eastern Church actively encourages the mystical life. Because the supernatural world intersects and impregnates the world of sense throughout, it should be a part of Christian life in general to develop the capacity to experience directly the glories of God's presence. The aim of every life should be union with God—actual deification, becoming through grace "partakers of the divine nature." In the classic of Russian spirituality, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, we get a description of one seeker's search for this grace. The pilgrim begins his journey by trying to pray without ceasing. With the instruction of a man of advanced spirituality he comes to a point where his world is transformed by reciting the Jesus Prayer "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me" thousands of times in a day. "Everything drew me to love and thank God: people, trees, plants, and animals. I saw them all as my kinfolk; I found in all of them the magic of the name of Jesus."

Protestantism

Though many causes are often given for the break between Roman Catholicism and Protestant Christianity, the basic cause was religious. Huston Smith focuses on two themes: justification by faith and the Protestant Principle.

Justification by Faith

Faith is not merely an intellectual assent to something without evidence, but a response of the entire self. It includes a movement of the affections in love and trust and a movement of the will in desire to be an instrument of God's redeeming love. "Justification" is the restoration of a right relationship with the ground of our being. Justification by faith requires a movement of the total self, in mind, will, and affections, all three. Christian faith is not faith until it lives, moves, and has its being in the Christian performance known as discipleship. Faith is the response by which God, heretofore a postulate of philosophers or theologians, becomes God for *me*, *my* God.

The Protestant emphasis on faith is a passionate repudiation of religious perfunctoriness: saying the creeds or doing the sacraments unaccompanied by the experience of God's love and a returning love for God are insufficient. Good works flow naturally from faith but they do not necessarily lead to faith. Faith is participating in God's infinite love for the world. Faith is moving into the light of God's love and letting

it transform us to become a part of it. We all have a lifelong need to know that our environment, the ground of our being is *for* us rather than *against* us. If we can really feel this, we will be released from the basic anxiety that causes us to try to elbow our way to security. Given faith in God's goodness, everything of importance follows (recall the radical trust in God that Jesus talked about in Matthew 6:25-34). In its absence, nothing can take its place.

The Protestant Principle

Stated philosophically, the Protestant Principle warns against absolutizing the relative. Stated theologically, it warns against idolatry. God is beyond nature and history. God is not removed from these, but the Divine cannot be equated with either of them. While the secular world proceeded to absolutize the state, or the self, or human intellect, Christians fell to absolutizing dogmas, the sacraments, the church, the Bible, or personal religious experience. As long as the religious things point beyond themselves to God, they can be invaluable. But let any of them claim to deserve absolute or unreserved allegiance—which is to say, claim to be God—and they become diabolical.

Protestants cannot accept the dogma of papal infallibility because opinions channeled through human minds can never wholly escape the risk of limitation and partial error. Same goes for creeds and church pronouncements. But Protestants have not been immune from idolatry themselves.

The chief Protestant idolatry has been bibliolatry. Protestants do believe that God speaks to people through the Bible as in no other way. But to elevate the Bible as a book to a point above criticism, to insist that every word and letter was dictated directly by God and so can contain no historical, scientific, or other inaccuracies, is again to forget that in entering the world, God's word must speak through human minds. Another common instance of idolatry within Protestantism has been the deification of private religious experience. The Protestant Church's insistence that faith must be a living experience has often led its constituents to assume that any vital experience must be the working of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps so, but again the experience is never pure Spirit. The Spirit must assume the contours of the human vessel, which means again that the whole is never uncompounded.

Protestantism protests *against* idolatry because it testifies *for* God's sovereignty in human life. God can enter human life through the Bible because in it we find the clearest picture of God's great goodness and see how human beings may find new life in fellowship with the Divine. When we read this record of God's grace with true openness and longing for God, God stands at the supreme intersection between the Divine and the human. The Bible becomes the *living* word of God.

Protestants readily admit that this concept of Christianity can lead to trouble. We can misconstrue God's word. As long as we are aware of that possibility, we are open to the correction of the Holy Spirit. Another danger is that we can derive different truths from the Bible and could slide toward complete individualism. Though the existence of 900+ denominations seems to show this, 85% of Protestants belong to twelve denominations—there is actually quite a lot of unity. The Protestant divisions reflect differing national origins or social groupings more than they do differing theologies. Finally, diversity is a good thing! Life and history are too fluid to allow God's redeeming word to be enclosed in a single form, whether it be doctrinal *or* institutional. Comforts of togetherness should not lead to structures that will restrict the dynamic character of God's continuing revelation. Christianity adapts so that it can share the Gospel to a constantly

changing world. Protestants accept these dangers because, risk for risk, they prefer their precarious freedom to the security of doctrines or institutions that (even while looking toward God) remain fallible. It is their faith that, in the end, prevents these burdens from discouraging them.

Questions

1. Why is Mary, the mother of Jesus, said to be the first and greatest disciple? Why does the Roman Catholic Church say she has authority beyond all other authority in the Church?
2. How is the Pope connected to Peter? How does Roman Catholicism view the office of the Pope and his responsibilities?
3. What are the seven sacraments in Roman Catholicism? How are they all related to the two primary sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist (Holy Communion)?
4. In what ways is the Eastern Orthodox Church like the Roman Catholic Church? What views do they share?
5. In what ways is the Eastern Orthodox Church different from the Roman Catholic Church?
6. How are Christians in the Eastern Orthodox view all "members of one another"?
7. Why and how is the mystical life emphasized in the Eastern Orthodox Church?
8. What is meant by "justification by faith"? How is it central to Protestantism?
9. What is the "Protestant Principle"?
10. What are two idolatries that Protestantism has often succumbed to?
11. How should one approach the reading of the Bible?
12. Do you agree with Smith that the diversity of Protestantism is a good thing? Why or why not?