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From Whence Cometh the Enemy: An Exploration Into Christian Traditions

Examining the history of Christian traditions forces one to confront some fascinating but disturbing contradictions. One of the most blatant of these contradictions is the claim of universality and the practice of exclusivity. While this contradiction is characteristic of other dualistic world views and value frameworks, we will focus on Christian traditions.

The fundamentally dualistic nature of the Christian traditions is found in the world view constructed around the absolute difference between God and "creation." What God the Creator is, "creation" is not. What "creation" is, God the Creator is not. Theological-metaphysical dualism, then, becomes the model for understanding reality. So framed, Christian traditions have typically conceived and valued reality in terms of the differentiation of opposites, e. g. right/wrong, good/evil, true/false, humans/nature, male/female. Due to this differentiation, reality is understood as consisting of absolute fragments. This but not that.

Within this dualistic world view, differentiation is usually joined with hierarchical valuation. Not only is there a difference, but these differences are valued differently. Frequently one side of the either/or differentiation has the power to define what is normative. As various liberation theologies teach us, those with such power invariably define themselves as normative and the "other" side as enemy. Feminism, for example, has demonstrated that males define male reality as norma-

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tive humanity, thereby relegating females to the status of "other" or deviant. Because the norm is defined over against the "other," the question to be asked is whether the norm can exist without the "other," or, in more specific terms, can Christianity, as traditionally understood, exist without an enemy. Is an us/them structure necessarily, inevitably, and integrally a part of Christian traditions?

During the first three centuries, Christianity exhibited a manifold pluralism, e.g., differing polities and theologies. Some of these differing forms can be found in the scriptural canon. Plurality of organization and diversity of understanding was possible because no group had sufficient power to define what was normative. However, even in the midst this pluralism, there were efforts to set up exclusive us/them dualities. For example, living under real or threatened persecution, "authentic Christians" refused to compromise with Rome and the imperial cult. At least some Christians believed that the churches contained a unique and necessary truth over against other claimed truths. Tertullian, for example, asks, "What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? What between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians?"¹ Several of Paul's letters make it clear that conformity of belief and behavior was expected within particular churches.

With the Constantinian establishment of Christianity in the early fourth century came the power to define and the power to expunge diversity and plurality. Conformity becomes the rule. If one possesses the truth, then deviance of any sort becomes intolerable. For example, as Theodosius I proclaimed, "They (heretics) will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation, and in the second the punishment which our authority, in accordance with the will of

¹ Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, vii, quoted in Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., (Oxford, 1963), p. 6. I have used the Bettenson volume as the source for quotes throughout because of its ready accessibility for the reader.

Heaven, shall decide to inflict.”² With the introduction of the power to define and power to enforce, Christian traditions become characterized by a hierarchical differentiation, pitting normative Christianity against a variety of “thems.” Enemies were found both outside and inside the traditions.

The enemy outside the traditions has gone by different names, depending on the historical period and situation, including those called heathens, pagans, Jews, Muslims, Communists, and secular humanists. The response to “them” has included such strategies as conversion, domestication, crusades, anathematizing, enslavement, and elimination. Dehumanization of the “other” is an inevitable consequence of us/them hierarchical differentiation. Anti-Semitism, for example, has been a consistent part of the history of these traditions.

The enemy also existed internally, among those “others” claiming to be part of the tradition yet excluded by the normative tradition. The internal enemy included those called heretics, sectarians, schismatics, reformers, and agents of the devil. The response to the “other” found inside the traditions has included such strategies as reconversion, inquisition, heresy hunts, anathematizing, and elimination. If the truth is possessed, then any deviance from that truth is viewed as dangerous and threatening, something that must be either coerced into submission or excised. Within this perspective, tolerance of differences is a sign of weakness, a mark of failure to maintain conformity with the known truth. Frequently maintaining the established truth meant that those with the power to define had to flex their muscles and use the heavy hand of correction. If deviance inside the tradition is diagnosed as life threatening, then almost any means become legitimate for restoring the church body to health. The demand of conformity has proved a heavy and awesome burden, often transferred to and inflicted upon those perceived as the “other.” The

² *Cod. Theod.*, XVI, i, 2, quoted in Bettenson, p. 22.

victimization of the "other" is a common theme in the history of these traditions. The story of the "other" provides considerable evidence that the history is different from that often told by the official memory of these traditions.

Conflict within and among those with the power to define and enforce made such fractiousness especially acute. For example, until the Great Schism, much of the history of Christianity was dominated by contentious relations between the Latin and Greek traditions. The break only made official what existed, in fact, long before. In 1054 both sides excluded and anathematized the other. From the Reformation onward, contentiousness between and among Catholics and Protestants has characterized the history of these traditions. The determination of "us" always excludes "them." The claim may be for a universal truth but, in fact, it is universal only if the "other" conforms to the truth defined by "us."

The American experiment of disestablishment and religious freedom dramatically changed the situation from state-church establishment. The power to define and enforce is operationally restricted to the voluntary membership within a particular group. Some modes of enforcement have been legally curtailed. While heresy trials and expulsion from the group may be legal, inquisitions and crusades are not. Within the American experiment, various competing groups exist, each claiming to represent the universal truth in one way or another. But, in actuality, these claims are mutually exclusive. The us/them duality continues as one religious group over against all others, or as Christian/nonChristian, or even as religious/nonreligious.

At least several significant consequences follow from the dualistic world view and value framework of these traditions. First, these traditions are exclusive. Because truth is understood within an absolute either/or structure, truth can only exist on one side or the other. For example, Luther writes, "we have one baptism, one Gospel, one faith,

and are all Christians alike; for baptism, Gospel, and faith, these alone make spiritual and Christian people.”³ Of necessity such exclusivity creates intolerance for deviance and an almost obsessive concern for conformity. “Unam Sanctam” (1302) claims, “outside this Church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins. . .”⁴ There are, however, differing kinds of exclusivity. Liberals, often quite tolerant of Christians of different stripes, still assume that one must be under the Christian umbrella to have access to the truth. At the conservative or fundamentalist end of the spectrum, exclusivity is based on the absolute uniqueness of different kinds of Christianity. Exclusive us/them claims have separated different traditions, as well as various perspectives within a particular tradition, from each other. Sometimes group loyalty is the basis for separation. At other times, specific issues cause separation, for example, biblical authority, ritual, polity, moral principles, and equality of women. Active, even aggressive, propagation of the truth is a corollary of us/them exclusivity. Such missionary efforts to Christianize “others” have brought mixed and diverse results. Assessing these results depends in part on one’s religious perspective, for example, where some see the wondrous spread of the Christian message, others see intrusive western imperialism under the cloak of Christianity.

Second, these traditions claim that the supernatural truth is possessed in absolute and definitive form. For example, as “The Definition of Chalcedon” (451) begins, “Therefore, following the holy Fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge. . .”⁵ Because this truth is understood as absolute, these traditions have resisted change. When change, in fact, has happened, it was usually understood as reinterpretation rather than as a real change of the truth. For Protestants, the absolute is found solely in biblical authority. But Scripture

³ Martin Luther, “The Appeal to the German Nobility,” quoted in Bettenson, p. 193.

⁴ “Unam Sanctam,” *Corpus Iuris Canonici* II, quoted in Bettenson, p. 115.

⁵ Council of Chalcedon, quoted in Bettenson, p. 51.

can be read in a variety of ways, depending on which interpretive principle is operative. Thus there are scores of mutually exclusive groups, each claiming that the absolute Scriptural norm determines their truth. For Catholicism and the various Orthodox traditions, the absolute is found in biblical authority coupled with the authority of the church (here read bishops) to absolutely interpret these absolute Scriptures. For example, one of the more extreme statements of such authority within the Catholic tradition can be found in Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, "That we may be altogether of the same mind and in conformity with the Church herself, if she shall have defined anything to be black which to our eyes appears to be white, we ought in like manner to pronounce it to be black."⁶ Because of this coupled absolute authority, the Catholic and Orthodox traditions have been more uniform, at least officially, than Protestantism.

As absolute, the truth is presented in dogmatic, definitional, even literal terms. Historically, this meant that the supernatural truth was propagated by way of specific words and doctrines. What is assumed is that the absolute unchangeable truth is identifiable with specific formulations of conditioned human language. For some this identity is possible only as mediated by the spirit or the church. For others there is an immediate and direct identity between the Word of God and the words of Scripture. In either case, it is assumed that the truth exists and is known in a particular possessed form and in no other. An illustration of this is found in Irenaeus' comment about Polycarp, "he had received this one and only truth from the Apostles, the truth which has been handed down by the Church." He goes on to claim that "the Apostles have lodged all that there is of the truth with her (the church)."⁷ What is claimed is that the universal truth must be accepted only in that specific and particular form. All other forms are ruled out as "other."

⁶ Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, part ii, quoted in Bettenson, p. 260.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Adv. haereses*, III, quoted in Bettenson, pp. 69-70.

But, in fact, there are many differing forms. While each claims to possess the absolute truth, in reality they are mutually exclusive.

Third, due to the exclusive and absolute claim made for the possessed truth, normative authority is perceived as supernatural and external. This unchangeable norm is the sole validation of truth claims. Submission to this external norm becomes the only mode of knowing the truth. Conforming to this norm becomes the only rule of life and living. In theory the external authority determines us, but in practice the power to define belies the theory. Such claimed external determination excludes experience and independent reason. Experience is rejected as a source of authority because its idiosyncratic nature makes experience contrary to the universal absolute. Independent human reason, although accepted in a qualified sense by some traditions, is rejected as solely adequate because it threatens the integrity of the given supernatural truth. Within this framework, questioning, even doubting this truth is a cardinal sin. As external, normative truth is self-sufficient and self-authenticating. An example, from the Protestant traditions, can be found in "The Westminster Confession of Faith" (1643), "The authority of the Holy Scripture. . . dependeth not on the testimony of any man or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof. . . The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself. . ." ⁸ "The Tridentine Profession of Faith" (1564), illustrates the Catholic tradition, "I acknowledge the sacred Scripture according to that sense which Holy Mother Church has held and holds, to whom it belongs to decide upon the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scripture. . ." ⁹ So defined, this supernatural truth is not accountable to or legitimated by any norm other than itself. All other criteria are defined as necessarily irrelevant. As a circular argument, the authority and power of the truth

⁸ "The Westminster Confession of Faith," quoted Bettenson, p. 245.

⁹ "The Tridentine Profession of Faith," from the Bull of Pius IV, *Injunction Nobis*, quoted in Bettenson, p. 267.

must be accepted on the authority and power of the truth. But, in actual fact, this truth was never so independent. The truth has always been determined by those with the power to define and interpret it.

When examining the consequences of these characteristics, one need not accept all that such critics as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, Durkheim, and Freud, have said about the Christian traditions, but they do provide some helpful insights. For example, it seems evident that Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Freud were correct in pointing out that one of the consequences of hierarchical differentiation is the creation and establishment of structures of dependence and self-alienation. If truth, meaning, and purpose are identified with God in the God/creation duality, then, "creation" in general and humans in particular are absolutely dependent upon God for truth, meaning, and purpose. The necessary and appropriate response is submission, conformity, and dependence. Psychologically this means that regardless of age, we will always remain children dependent upon the Father God. If dependency is the structure of existence, then freedom, in the sense of independent free choice, and responsibility are for all practical purposes diminished, if not eliminated. St. Augustine and Calvin, among others, acknowledged this consequence in their affirmation of predestination and election. As Augustine claims, "they *will* just because God works in them so to will."¹⁰ Calvin writes, "By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he has decided in his own mind what he wishes to happen in the case of each individual. For all men are not created on an equal footing, but for some eternal life is pre-ordained, for others eternal damnation. . ."¹¹ Others argued for both dependence on God and human freedom with responsibility. For example, Ignatius claims, "It must also be borne in mind, that although it be most true, that no one is saved but he that is predestined,

¹⁰ Augustine, *De correptione et gratia*, quoted in Bettenson, p. 56.

¹¹ Calvin, *Christianae Religionis Institutio* (1559), quoted in Bettenson, p. 260.

yet we must speak with circumspection concerning this matter, lest perchance, stressing too much the grace or predestination of God, we should seem to wish to shut out the force of free will and the merits of good works. . .¹² Pelagius, Armenius, Wesley, and others, tried to break the strangle hold of dependency by rejecting predestination and election. However these attempts compromised the essential dualistic character of the Christian traditions and thereby questioned the very nature of God and the status of being human. Even though rejecting absolute dependency, these Pelagians affirmed a relative dependency based on cooperation with God. For example, Augustine quotes Pelagius as saying, "Therefore man's praise lies in his willing and doing a good work; or rather this praise belongs both to man and to God who has granted the possibility of willing and working, and who by the help of his grace ever assists this very possibility."¹³ When the clear and distinct lines of dualism are broken within the Christian world view, the result is theological and ethical ambiguity. While creative, these efforts are nevertheless deviant if measured by the official norm of absolute dualism.

Both Marx and Durkheim noted that official Christian traditions baptize and sanctify the values and structures of the status quo. Given the reality of the power to define and enforce, such conservatism, even in its reactionary form, ought not be surprising. Of course, there have been times when it has been in the interest of these traditions to separate from the status quo. For example, Hosius, "orthodox" Bishop of Cordova, writes to the Arian Emperor Constantius, "we are not permitted to exercise an earthly rule, and you, Sire, are not authorized to burn incense."¹⁴ But power tends to associate with power. Religious establishment is usually purchased at the price of sanctifying the status quo. As a result, the official tradition frequently alienated and

¹² Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, part ii, quoted in Bettenson, p. 260.

¹³ Augustine, *De gratia Christi*, quoted in Bettenson, p. 53.

¹⁴ Athanasius, *Hist.*, Ar 44, quoted in Bettenson, p. 19.

marginalized the many without power. The many are defined by, and therefore subject to, those with the power to define. Even when state-church establishment is broken, as in the American experiment, many religious traditions sanctify the dominant structures and cultural values. What is presented as universal and absolute truth, in fact, looks more like relative cultural values. For example, many of the established traditions endorsed the structures of slavery in the American South prior to the Civil War. Currently most traditions baptize the values and structures of democracy and free enterprise economics. What is lost in this alliance between religion and the status quo structures and values is the prophetic voice of religion. While this voice has been a part of the larger tradition, usually in the subterranean realms, it has not characterized the official normative tradition very often, or for very long. When the prophetic voice does surface, it quickly becomes institutionalized into a new orthodoxy that accommodates, if not baptizes, the status quo. Conservatism, in the sense of preserving the status quo, is characteristic of these traditions when they live in an environment that is not explicitly antithetical to them.

There are several directions within these traditions which, when active or activated, tend to modify the above characteristics. First, in at least some forms of Christian mysticism, the dualistic structure of reality is muted, if not overcome in the experience of unity and identity. At one level, Christian mysticism sounds dualistic, especially in its language of relationship. But at another level, especially with the assumption that there is a universal given in human experience, the language of the experience of oneness overcomes dualism. Eckhart and *Cloud of Unknowing* illustrate this direction. Because it challenges the exclusive, absolute, and external claims made by normative traditions, mysticism has consistently been viewed with great suspicion and frequently relegated to the realms of heresy.

Second, to the extent that some have taken the universal nature of

the truth claim seriously, the us/them duality of Christian/non-Christian has been qualified. For example, Justin argues, "He (Christ) is the reason (Word) of whom the whole human race partakes, and those who live according to reason are Christians, even though they are accounted atheists. Such were Socrates and Heraclitus among the Greeks, and those like them..."¹⁵ Those who argue for natural theology or a rationally based Christianity illustrate this direction. Deists, for example, tried to demonstrate that Christianity is not mysterious as a special revelation but, as a republication of the religion of nature, was as old as creation. If truth is identified with perennial reason and natural rationality, then claims for supernatural truth carry no real or unique warrant. Even the existentialist mode, as found in Tillich, Bultmann, and others, which bases authentic religious experience on human limits and meaning, undercuts the dualistic characteristics of traditional orthodoxy. Some forms of the comparative religion approach, as well as that of perennial philosophy, also have the same effect. While these directions relativize the exclusive, absolute, and external claims of traditional Christianity, they affirm the universality of truth. What is challenged is the particular and specified form of the truth.

Sacramentalism is a third aspect in these traditions that has the effect of overcoming dualism. In the sacrament, one can experience the identity or unity of God/human and human/human. For example, in the Eucharist oneness with God comes in the very act of eating and drinking. Because Protestant traditions have been more explicit in their affirmation of the absolute dualities, some, e.g., the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, have qualified sacramentalism, and others, e.g., the Anabaptist traditions, have essentially eliminated sacramentalism. But when sacraments are understood as outward signs of inner transformation, a real at-onement with God, they offer a means of transcending dualism.

¹⁵ Justin, *Apology*, I, xlvi, quoted in Bettenson, P. 5.

Given this analysis, we can now ask the question of whether Christianity can exist without an enemy. If we answer in terms of the historic dualistic structure within which Christian traditions have operated and understood themselves, the answer is clearly no. The essential nature of us/them dualism makes the enemy necessary, inevitable, and integral. Given hierarchical differentiation based on the power to define and enforce, the enemy will be found both externally and internally. If, on the other hand, such directions as mysticism, perennial philosophy, and sacramentalism, and there are others, were to modify or transform these traditions, the answer would be a qualified yes. What becomes critical is the extent of transformation. The shift from Hebraic based Christianity to one grounded in Platonic categories, the shift from Platonic Christianity to one with an Aristotelian basis, and eventually to one rooted in a modern, secular, technological context, illustrate that radical transformations have happened in the past. However, given the characteristics noted above and the conservative influence in many of the traditions today, it seems unlikely that a radical transformation will happen in the near future. Clearly there are pressures, sometimes strong, moving to so transform. These pressures have made and are making a profound impact on some people. But the forces of dualistic hierarchical differentiation in the official traditions seem strong enough to domesticate, even defeat, these pressures for change. Too many compelling enemies preoccupy these traditions. As a matter of fact, some of the very pressures seeking to transform the traditions are identified as the enemy. In a real sense the enemy comes from the way Christian traditions frame reality and make sense of experience. If everything is understood in terms of either/or or us/them, enemies will be inevitably present. The best that may be expected is to "love your enemy." But if history teaches us anything, even this may be an incredible claim, except for those rare people and moments when the transcending truth is really embodied.