

# CULTURE AND COHERENCE IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## The six ages of Christianity

From Pentecost to the twentieth century, Christian history may be divided into six phases. Each phase represents its embodiment in a major culture area which has meant that in that phase it has taken an impress from that culture. In each phase the expression of the Christian faith has developed features which could only have originated in that culture whose impress it has taken within that phase.

For one brief, but vital, period, Christianity was entirely Jewish. The Christians of the first generation were all Jews — diverse, perhaps, in background and outlook, Hebraist and Hellenist, conservative and liberal — but without the slightest idea that they had “changed their religion” by recognising Jesus as Messiah. It remains one of the marvels of the ages that Christianity entered its second phase at all. But those unnamed “men of Cyprus and Cyrene” introduced some Greek speaking pagans in Antioch to the Jewish national saviour, and those law-righteous apostles and elders at Jerusalem agreed that they might enter Israel without becoming Jews. The result was that Christianity became Hellenistic-Roman; the Messiah, Saviour of Israel was recognised to be also the Lord, Saviour of souls. It happened just in time, for soon afterwards the Jewish state disappeared in the early holocausts of AD 70 and AD 135. Only the timeous diffusion of faith in Jesus across cultural lines gave that faith any continuing place in the world. Without its diffusion at that time its principal representatives would have been the Ebionites and similar groups who by the third and fourth centuries lay on the very fringe of the Christian movement, even if they themselves could claim to be the enduring legacy of James the Just and the Jerusalem elders.

In the process of transmission the expression of that faith changed beyond what many an outsider might recognise. To see the extent of the change one has only to look at the utterances of early Jewish Christians as reflected in the New Testament, the utterances which indicate their priorities, the matters most on their hearts. “We had hoped that he would be the one to set Israel free”, says the disillusioned disciple on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:21, TEV). On the mount of ascension, the preoccupation is the same. Realising that they stand at the threshold of a new era, the disciples ask, “Lord will you at this time give the Kingdom back to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Statements and questions like these could be uttered only by Jews, out of centuries of present suffering and hope deferred. They can have no meaning for those who belong to the nations,

whether in the first or the twentieth century. These come to Jesus with quite different priorities, and those priorities shape the questions they ask, even about salvation. A first century Galatine Gentile would never have brought to Jesus as a matter of urgency the question of the political destiny of Israel; though he might have raised that of the destiny of the soul. The fact remains that Jesus Christ fulfilled the different statements, and answered the different questions; or rather, he convinced his Jewish and his Gentile followers, as he convinces his followers today, that the answer to their deepest questions lay with him, even when the question and the answer did not seem to fit. No doubt the words of Cleophas on the Emmaus road, or of the disciples on the mountain, betray an inadequate understanding of his person and work. Nevertheless, he does not reject that understanding as altogether misplaced. He does not say, "I am not in the business of giving the Kingdom back to Israel, you should keep out of politics and concentrate on inner spiritual realities." He accepts the statement and the question in the terms in which they are posed — terms which centuries of peculiar experience had conditioned Jews to frame them. But — "it is not for you to know when" (Acts 1:7). There is no reason to think that Gentile statements about the ultimate will be any more final, or Gentile questions about it any more penetrating, than Jewish ones. There is no reason to suppose that Christ's answer to our own fundamental statements and questions, conditioned by quite different experiences, will be any less oblique than those he gave to Cleophas or the disciples. We know only that the full answer must ultimately be no less satisfying.

Those Christian Jews in Antioch who realised that Jesus had something to say to their pagan friends took an immense risk. They were prepared to drop the time-honoured word Messiah, knowing that it would mean little to their neighbours, and perhaps mislead them — what concern was the redeemer of Israel, should they grasp the concept, to them? They were prepared to see the title of their national saviour, the fulfilment of the dearest hopes of their people, become attached to the name of Jesus as though it was a sort of surname. They took up the ambiguous and easily misunderstood word "Lord" (Acts 11:20; contrast, e.g. Acts 9:22, which relates to a Jewish audience). They could not possibly have foreseen where their action would lead; and it would be surprising if someone did not warn them about the disturbing possibilities of confusion and syncretism. But their cross-cultural communication saved Christian faith for the world.

### **The second age of Christianity**

The second of the six phases of Christianity was Hellenistic-Roman. This is not, of course, to say that within that age Christianity was geographically confined to the area where Hellenistic-Roman culture was dominant. Important Christian communities lay, for instance, in Central Asia, and East Africa, and South India. But the dominant expression of the Christian faith for several centuries resulted from its steady penetration of Hellenistic thought and culture during a period when that culture was also associated with a single political entity, the Roman Empire.

The second phase, like the first, left its mark on all later Christianity. Of the new religious ideas which entered with the Christian penetration of Hellenistic

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culture, one of the most permeative for the future was that of orthodoxy, of a canon of right belief, capable of being stated in a series of propositions arrived at by a process of logical argument. Such a feature was not likely to mark Christianity in its Jewish period; Jewish identity has always been concerned either with what a person *is* or with what he *does* rather than with what he believes. But when Christian faith began to penetrate the Hellenistic Roman World, it encountered a total system of thought, a system to which it was in some respects antipathetic, but which, once encountered, had to be permeated. The system had a certain inbuilt arrogance, a feature it has never quite lost despite the mutations through which the Hellenistic-Roman legacy has gone in its transmission over the centuries to other peoples, and despite the penetration effected by Christian faith. Basically it maintained that there is one desirable pattern of life, a single "civilisation" in effect, one model of society, one body of law, one universe of ideas. Accordingly, there are in essence two types of humanity: people who share that pattern and those ideas, and people who do not. There are Greeks — a cultural, not an ethnic, term — and there are barbarians. There are civilised people who share a common heritage, and there are savages, who do not.

In many ways the Jews and their religion already represented a challenge to this assumption. Whatever degree of assimilation to it many Jews might reflect, the stubborn fact of Jewish identity put them in a different category from almost all the rest of the Hellenistic-Roman universe. Alone in that universe they had an alternative literature, a written tradition, of comparable antiquity. And they had their own dual classification of mankind: Israel, *the* nation, and the nations. Hellenistic-Roman Christians had no option but to maintain, and to seek to reconcile, aspects of both their inheritances.

The total system of thought had to be penetrated, by the Gospel, Christianised. This meant the endeavour to bring the intellectual tradition into captivity to Christ and using it for new purposes, and it also meant putting the traditions of codification and of organisation to the service of the Gospel. The result was orthodoxy; logically expounded belief set in codified form, established through a process of consultation and maintained through effective organisation. Hellenistic-Roman civilisation offered a total system of thought, and expected general conformity to its norms. The Christian penetration of the system inevitably left it a total system.

### **The third age — Barbarian Christianity**

Hellenistic-Roman civilisation lived for centuries in the shadow of fear; fear of the day when the centre could not hold, when things fell apart, when the over-extended frontiers collapsed and the barbarian hordes poured in. Christians fully shared these fears. Tertullian, who lived in the age of persecution, though he would not countenance Christians in the army — Christ has unbelted every soldier, he says — prayed for the preservation of the Empire; for when the frontiers collapse, the Great Tribulation would begin. For the people living under the Christian Empire the triumph of the barbarians would be equated with the end of Christian civilisation.

Two great events brought about the end of Hellenistic Roman Christianity. One had been widely predicted — the collapse of the Western Roman Empire

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before the barbarians. The other no one could have predicted — the emergence of the Arabs as a world power and their occupation of the Eastern provinces where the oldest and strongest Christian churches lay. The combination of these forces led to the end of the Hellenistic-Roman phase of Christianity. That it did not lead to the slow strangulation of the total Christian presence in the world was due to the slow, painful and far from satisfactory spread of Christian allegiance among the tribal peoples beyond the old frontiers, the people known as barbarians, the destroyers of Christian civilisation. What in fact happened was the development of a third phase of Christianity, what we may call a barbarian phase. Once again, it was only just in time: centuries of erosion and attrition faced the peoples of Christianity's Hellenistic heartlands. Once again, Christianity had been saved by its cross-cultural diffusion.

The culture gap to be bridged was quite as great as that between Jew and Greek, yet the former faith of classical civilisation became the religion of peasant cultivators. The process was marked by the more or less ready acceptance by the new Christians of a great deal of the cultural inheritance of the classical civilisation from which they derived their Christianity. Further, when they substituted the God of the Bible for their traditional pantheons, the language and ideas had passed through a Greek-Roman filter before it reached them. The significance of this we must consider later.

Nevertheless, the barbarian phase was emphatically not a simple extension of the Christianity of the patristic age, but a new creation, conditioned less by city-based literary, intellectual and technological tradition than by the circumstances of peasant cultivators and their harsh, uncertain lives. If they took their ideas from the Hellenistic Christian world, they took their attitudes from the primal world; and both ideas and attitudes are components in the complex which makes up a people's religion. As with their predecessors, they appropriated the Christian faith for themselves, and reformulated it with effects which continued amid their successes after their own phase had passed away. If the second phase of Christianity invented the idea of orthodoxy, the third invented the idea of the Christian nation. Christian Roman Emperors might establish the Church, might punish heretics, might make laws claiming allegiance to Christ, might claim to represent Christ, but tribal peoples knew a far stronger law than any Emperor could enforce; that of custom. Custom is binding upon every child born into a primal community; and conformity to that custom is simply unthinkable. A communal decision to adopt the Christian faith might take some time in coming; there might be uncertainty, division, debate for a while but once thoroughly made, that decision would bind everyone in that society. A community must have a single custom. It was not necessarily a case of strong rulers enforcing their own choice. In Iceland, which was a democracy with no central ruler, the Assembly was divided down the middle between Christians and non-Christians. When the decision for Christianity was eventually made, the non-Christians felt bitter and betrayed, but no one suggested a division into communities with different religions. Religion in fact is but one aspect of the custom which binds a society together. There can be only one Church in a community. And so barbarian Christianity brings to fruition the idea of the Christian nation.

Once the idea of the Christian nation was established, a new hermeneutic

habit easily developed; the parallel between the Christian nation and Israel. Once nation and church are coterminous in scope, the experiences of the nation can be interpreted in terms of the history of Israel. In Western Christianity this habit has long outlived the historical circumstances which gave it birth, and has continued into the age of pluralism and secularisation.

### **The fourth and fifth ages of Christianity**

The fourth cultural phase of Christianity was a natural development of the third. Inter-action between Christian faith and practice in its Hellenistic-Roman form and the culture of the northern peoples produced a remarkably coherent system across Western and Central Europe. When the Eastern Roman Empire, which effectively prolonged the Hellenistic phase of Christianity for several centuries in one area of the world, finally collapsed before the Muslims, this new hybrid Western form of Christianity became the dominant representation of Christianity. In the sixteenth century this Western formulation was to undergo radical revision through the movements of Reformation. The Protestant version of this was particularly radical, not least (through its emphasis on vernacular Scriptures) in stressing the local encounter of man with the Word of God. Reforming Catholicism, on the other hand, stressed the universal nature of the Church, but unconsciously established its universality on the basis of features which belonged essentially to Western intellectual and social history and indeed, largely to a particular period of it. Both forms, however, belonged unmistakably to Western Europe; their very differences marked a growing cultural divergence between the north and the south of the area.

One major development that took place within the West over those centuries set a challenge to Christian faith as hitherto received in Europe and required its reformulation. As we have seen, a necessary feature of barbarian Christianity was communal decision and mass response. But Western thought developed a particular consciousness of the individual as a monad, independent of kin-related identity. Christianity in its Western form adapted to this developing consciousness, until the concept of Christian faith as a matter of individual decision and individual application became one of the hallmarks of Western Christianity.

This Western Phase of Christianity developed into another, with which it should probably be taken: the age of expanding Europe. The population of Europe was exported to other continents and the dominance of Europe extended, until by the twentieth century people of European origin occupied, possessed or dominated the greater part of the globe. During this vital period, Christianity was the professed, and to a considerable extent the active, religion of almost all the European peoples.

Seen in the context of Christian history as a whole, this period saw two remarkable developments. One was a substantial recession from the Christian faith among the European peoples. Its significance was not at first manifest, because it was not regular and steady. Beginning in the sixteenth century, it had reached notable proportions by the eighteenth, when it appeared as if Christianity might still claim the masses of Europe but was losing the intellectuals. In the eighteenth century however, and for much of the

nineteenth, there was a Christian counter-attack, which halted the movement of recession in Europe and brought spectacular accessions in the new towns of North America. The sudden quickening of the recession, therefore, in the twentieth century took observers by surprise— though predictions of its extent had been current a couple of centuries earlier. Only in the twentieth century did it become clear that the great towns which were the source and the sign of Europe's dominance, had never really been evangelised at all.

The other major development of the period was the cross-cultural transplantation of Christianity, with varying degrees of success, to multitudes of people outside Europe. It did not look overwhelming by 1920; the high hopes once entertained of the evangelisation of the world in one generation had by that time drained away into the trenches of the First World War. But we can see now that it was enough. The seeds of Christian faith had been planted in the Southern continents; before long they could be seen to be fruiting abundantly. All the world Empires, except the Russian, have now passed away; the European hegemony of the world is broken; the recession of Christianity among the European peoples appears to be continuing. And yet we seem to stand at the threshold of a new age of Christianity, one in which its main base will be in the Southern continents, and where its dominant expression will be filtered through the culture of those continents. Once again, Christianity has been saved for the world by its diffusion across cultural lines.

### **Christian expansion and the sixth age of Christianity**

Let us pause here to consider the peculiar history of Christianity, as compared with other faiths. Hindus say with some justice that they represent the world's earliest faith, for many things in Indian religion are the same now as they were before Israel came out of Egypt. Yet over all those centuries, the geographical and cultural centre has been the same. Invaders like the Aryans have come and made their mark; great innovative movements like that of the Buddha have come, and flourished awhile, and then passed on elsewhere. The Christians and the Muslims with their claims to universal allegiance have come and made their converts. But still the same faith remains in the same place, absorbing all sorts of influences from without, not being itself absorbed by any.

By contrast, Iranian religion has been vital enough to have a moulding effect at certain crucial times on Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam in succession; and yet as a separate, identifiable phenomenon in the world, its presence today is tiny. Christianity, on the other hand, has throughout its history spread outwards, across cultural frontiers, so that each new point on the Christian circumference is a new potential Christian centre. And the very survival of Christianity as a separate faith has evidently been linked to the process of cross-cultural transmission. Indeed, with hindsight, we can see that on several occasions this transmission took place only just in time; that without it, the Christian faith must surely have withered away. Nor has its progress been steadily outwards, as Muslims may claim of their faith. Its progress has been serial, with a principal presence in different parts of the world at different times.

Each phase of Christian history has seen a transformation of Christianity as it has entered and penetrated another culture. There is no such thing as

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“Christian culture” of “Christian civilisation” in the sense that there is an Islamic culture, and an Islamic civilisation. There have been several different Christian civilisations already; there may yet be many more. The reason for this lies in the infinite translatability of the Christian faith. Islam, the only other faith hitherto to make a comparable impact in such global terms, can produce a simple recognisable culture (recognisable despite local assimilations and variations) across its huge geographical spread. This has surely something to do with the ultimate untranslatability of its charter document, the Qur’an. The Christian Scriptures, by contrast, are open to translation; nay, the great Act on which Christian faith rests, the Word becoming flesh and pitching tent among us, is itself an act of translation. And this principle brings Christ to the heart of each culture where he finds acceptance; to the burning questions within that culture, to the points of reference within it by which men know themselves. That is why each phase of Christian history has produced new themes; themes which the points of reference of that culture have made inescapable for those who share that framework. The same themes may lie beyond the conception of Christians of an earlier or another framework of thought. They will have their own commanding heights to be conquered by Christ.

### Diversity and coherence in historic Christianity

If we were to take samples of *representative* Christians from every century from the first to the twentieth, moving from place to place as will be necessary if our choice is to be representative, would they have anything in common? Certainly such a collection of people would often have quite different priorities in the expression of the faith. And it is not only that the priorities are different; what appears of utmost importance to one group may appear intolerable, even blasphemous, to another. Even were we to take only those acknowledged as forming the tradition of Christianity represented by Western Evangelicals — how does the expression of the faith compare among Temple-worshipping Jew, Greek Council Father, Celtic monk, German Reformer, English Puritan, Victorian Churchman? How defective each would think the other on matters vital to religion?

And yet I believe we can discern a firm coherence underlying all these, and indeed, the whole of historic Christianity. It is not easy to state this coherence in propositional, still less in credal form — for extended credal formulation is itself a necessary product of a particular Christian Culture. But there is a small body of convictions and responses which express themselves when Christians of any culture express their faith. These may perhaps be stated thus:

(1) The worship of the God of Israel. This not only defines the nature of God; the One, the Creator and the Judge, the One who does right and before whom man falls down; it marks the historical particularity of Christian faith. And it links the Christian — usually a Gentile — with the history of a people quite a different from his own. It gives him a point of reference outside himself and his society.

(2) The ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth. This is perhaps the test which above all marks off historic Christianity from the various movements along its fringes, as well as from other world faiths which accord recognition to the Christ. Once again, it would be pointless to try to encapsulate this ultimacy

for ever in any one credal formula. Any such formula will be superseded; or, even if adopted for traditional reasons, it may make no impression on believers who do not have the conceptual vocabulary the formula will imply. Each culture has its ultimate; and Christ is the ultimate in everyone's vocabulary.

(3) That God is active where believers are.

(4) That believers constitute a people of God transcending time and space.

These convictions appear to underlie the whole Christian tradition across the centuries, in all its diversity. Some of the very diversity of Christ in expression, indeed, has itself arisen from the pressure of the need to set forth these responses in terms of the believers' framework of thought and perception of the world. To them we should perhaps add a small body of institutions which have continued from century to century. The most obvious of these have been the reading of a common body of Scriptures and the special use of bread and wine and water.

### **Southern cultures and the Christian future**

Once more the Christian faith is penetrating new cultures — those of Africa and the Pacific and parts of Asia. (The Latin American situation is too complex for us to pause to consider its peculiar significance here.) The present indications are that these southern expressions of Christianity are becoming the dominant forms of the faith.

This is likely to mean the appearance of new themes and priorities undreamt of by ourselves or by earlier Christian ages; for it is the mark of Christian faith that it must bring Christ to the big issues which are closest to men's hearts; and it does so through the structures by which people perceive and recognise their world; and these are not the same for all men. It must not be assumed that themes which have been primary in the Christian penetration of former cultures will remain primary for all the new ones. They may not possess those points of reference which made orthodoxy, for instance, or the Christian nation, or the primacy of individual decision absolutely crucial to the capture by Christ of other world views. Pious early Jewish Christians would have found their Greek successors strangely cold about Israel's most precious possession, the Law of God and its guide to living. Many of them would have been equally disturbed by the intellectual complexities into which christological discussion was leading Greek Christian. In each case what was happening was the working out of Christian faith within accepted views of the world, so that those world views — as with the conversion of believers — are transformed, yet recognisable.

As the process continues in the Southern continents, Christians whose tradition has been shaped by other factors will still be able to look out for the signposts of historic Christianity so far: the worship of the God of Israel, the recognition of the ultimate significance of Christ, the knowledge that God is active among the believers, the acknowledgement of a people of God transcending time and space; and join in the common reading of the Scriptures, and in the special use of bread and wine and water.

For in this survey I have left on one side a vital theme. I have talked of the transmission of Christianity across cultural frontiers and the way that this has produced a series of Christian transformations across the centuries. These



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transformations may be seen as the result of the great principle of translatability which lies at the heart of Christian faith and is demonstrated both in the Incarnation and in the Scriptures. It might be valuable to link this process with Paul's vision in Ephesians 4 of the full-grown man unto which we are to grow together — as though the very diversity of Christian humanity makes it complete. The image is hard for us to appropriate because of the very individualism so crucial a part of our own world view. But it looks as though Paul was less impressed by the passing of faith to the Gentiles — mightily as he rejoiced in it; still less by the new shape which Christian faith took in Gentile hands — much as he himself may have been responsible for this; than by the fact that through Christ one nation had been made out of two. Jew and Gentile, who had not in centuries been able to eat in each others' houses without recalling the whole covenant of God into question, now sat down together at the table of the Lord. It was a phase of Christian history that did not last long. Not long after Paul's time Gentiles so dominated the Christian church that in most areas Jews were hardly noticeable in it. Christianity became a Gentile matter, just as in its earliest days it had been a Jewish matter. But, for a few brief years, the one-made-out-of-two was visibly demonstrated, the middle wall of partition was down, the irreconcilables were reconciled. This was, surely, not simply a historical episode, but a paradigmatic one, to be repeated, even if briefly, again and again. It is repeated as people separated by language, history and culture recognise each other in Christ. And in the recognition is not based on one adopting the ways of thought and behaviour and expression, however sanctified, of the other; that is Judaising, and another Gospel. Christ must rule in the minds of his people; which means extending his dominion over those corporate structures of thought that constitute a culture. The very act of doing so must sharpen the identity of those who share a culture. The faith of Christ is infinitely translatable, it creates "a place to feel at home". But it must not make a place where we are so much at home that no one also can live there. Here we have no abiding city. In Christ all poor sinners meet, and in finding themselves reconciled with him, are reconciled to each other.

Some aspects of this topic are explored further in "The Gospel as the Prisoner and the Liberator of Culture", *Faith and Thought* 108 (1-2) 1981, 39-52 (reprinted in *Missionalia* 10(3) 1982, 93-105 and *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7 (2) 1983, 219-233) and in "The History of Christian Expansion reconsidered", in Monica Hill (ed.) *How Churches grow* (London: MARC Europe 1984, 34-43). I have tried to deduce from the historical deposit the nature of "historic Christianity" as a whole in the section "Christianity" in J. R. Hinnells (ed.), *A Handbook of Living Religions*, Harmondsworth: Viking-Penguin 1984, 56-122.