

NEW PERSPECTIVES

Revelation as an on going process

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Focus by Geoffrey Hunter after reading Lloyd Geering:
"The Legacy of Christianity" in The Once Future Jesus,
(The Jesus Seminar)

Throughout my journey as a Christian I have puzzled about how one may discern the essential truth. I had come to believe that by placing a trust in the God, which I knew through the Christian tradition, there was an eternal source by which one can know what is the best for mankind. On this basis of an assured essential and eternal truth I set my values. With this assurance I have extolled teachings about justice and love.

But it has not been as simple as that. If I am to be consistent with the developing understanding of the "created" universe in which we live then some of the traditional interpretations have to be changed.

I find that my particular interpretations of the traditional sources of revelation are not necessarily the same as other Christians. I well remember the raised eyebrows in public debate in the early 1980's when I challenged the traditional rejection of homosexuals in the church. Through out the centuries there have been new interpretations and re-interpretations of theological "truths". In a previous century approval of slavery as a Christian practice had been challenged and finally rejected by calling on selective acceptance of biblical material as reflecting essential truths. In similar manner I was involved in a reassessment of the traditional interpretations of biblical material.

On what then do we rely for truth? No matter how conservative the theologian, every interpreter has to make selections from Biblical material that has developed with inherently contradictory ideas. What is relied upon in these interpretations is a choice of particular human sources or traditions that are trusted as providing a valid revelation from God.

However an argument for truths to be a revelation from a divine source seems to be circular.

1) God's truth is beyond our glimpse. 2) People glimpse something. 3) There is trust that this is a revelation of that which is beyond glimpsing. Therefore 4) the truth (that is beyond our glimpse) has been glimpsed! But is there really a glimpse of something beyond us? All we have is a statement of faith that this "glimpse" apparently reflects an "eternal fact".

Each idea emerges in the context of a particular historical situation. It becomes tradition when it is adopted by subsequent generations as valuable for them also in their situation in their particular time. Our faith statements are based on a trust in particular human insights and traditions. The question is whether each of these understandings is still relevant for our situation? Interpretations for our age need to be consistent with the understandings of our age.

For some time now I have been arguing that Theology is a form of human theorising, which is the similar to the scientific method. A hypothesis is suggested and in the conclusions there are accepted "laws" which seem to explain phenomena. However theology does not have the empirical process of the scientific method where the conclusions are demonstrably consistent with the hypothesis. With scientific thinking we are progressively discovering more data that demands further refinement with new hypotheses and new conclusions. In theology the theories need to evolve to be consistent with the generally accepted perceptions. However in most traditions theology has, as Geering describes it, become ossified¹ in perspectives of earlier times.

¹ Lloyd Geering., "The Legacy of Christianity"; The Once and Future Jesus: p134

I think that it is fascinating to see that it is the very assumptions of the Judaeo-Christian heritage which provided a stepping stone that enabled the possibility of developing modern science. The underlying assumption in the theological process for Christians has been that there is a supreme being, whom we call God, who is the originator and ongoing revealer. Lloyd Geering suggests it was this sense of a unified system that has enabled modern scientific investigation to develop. He cites A.N.Whitehead as "contending that science originated from the medieval Christian concept of God as the one which combined the personal energy of Yahweh with the rationality of the Greek philosopher".²

He argues further that this modern scientific development could only occur in the context of the tradition that assumed that there was a unity of purpose grounded in its "law giver Creator". Karl Jaspers suggested that ancient Greek science could not evolve into the modern Western science in the way that later Christian thinkers were able to create a universal science out of their culture. This was because of the Judeo-Christian sense of unity in the understanding about how the world was perceived to operate. "God was not only the first cause in bringing the world into being; it was God's laws which constituted the structure of the physical world, and it was God's will which ultimately determined all that occurred within it". Moreover "the pioneers of empirical science were all Christians who saw themselves firmly established with the Christian tradition"; though they were often viewed as being on the Christian margins. "They were simply trying to discover those laws of nature."³

This theory served very well along the way. The pioneer work that developed modern scientific understanding was based on a belief that there is a God. This provided the necessary rationale and platform for that time. However, modern scientific thinking no longer needs to incorporate this assumption of a God.

The same cannot be generally said about Christian theology. Admittedly reassessment has occurred along the way. In the article cited above Lloyd Geering walks the reader through a description of the historical development in the early centuries by Christianity of a hope for a heaven. After the non-arrival of the *parousia*, the hopes were transferred from a physical earth to a spiritual heaven. In contrast "the advent of the modern secular world has been occurring with the gradual collapse of that imagined Christian superstructure".⁴ However it is noted that recently "even the Pope finally concluded this year that *heaven is not a place*".⁵

The Judeo-Christian tradition grew with the assumptions that there is an almighty God who is firstly the source of everything as creator, and secondly controls the environment (albeit in a beneficial manner that offers humans a partnership in controlling their destiny). While Christianity continues to cling to this assumption it makes humans as captive and dependent on a power that will beneficially provide for them. This is a *Claytons freedom* where because humans are considered to be "sinful" we are unable to grow ourselves to full potential without a benevolent forgiving God.

It was Geering's article that enabled me to finally throw off the cloak of *revelation from beyond* as the controlling factor in the destiny of humans. I am now able to revisit the ideas of Hegel and Feuerbach.

According to Feuerbach, Jesus was an *incarnation*.⁶ But it was not an incarnation as God "become flesh". Rather it was an incarnation of "the death of heaven". There is a realisation of the restoration of humankind to wholeness without the need of a divine intervention. The alienation in humans from higher ideals leaves negative and destructive tendencies. However with the incarnation, the ideal that was seen in the myth of God is no longer found on a mythical throne in heaven. Rather the higher ideals are already living in human form.

² Lloyd Geering, *ibid*: p137

³ Lloyd Geering, *ibid*: p137

⁴ Lloyd Geering, *ibid*: p140

⁵ Lloyd Geering, *ibid*: p138

⁶ Lloyd Geering, *ibid*: p141f

Hegel had interpreted the cross event as symbolising the *death of God*. For Feuerbach it symbolised the end of theism.⁷ Thus resurrection also must become symbolic of a renewal within humanness rather than a moving on to other-worldliness; such as a heaven.

But these are modern understandings. Jesus perceived the world in which he lived in the context of his cultural tradition. In that context he offered the insight of empowerment. He broke through the traditional ideas of a God who was external, with a God who is intimate. It is this innovation in thinking that enabled the progression of thought towards our modern understandings. The difficulty for us today is that the words of Jesus are in the context of his culture of mythological formulations; namely with a God as his Father.

Modern theologians are spelling out the implications of the teachings of Jesus. But Jesus in the context of his time and cultural perspective could never have understood our modern interpretations. I suspect that even the formulations of the early century Christian thinkers would probably have dismayed Jesus. Jesus was a man of his times. Today we are a people with different understandings of the world than Jesus could have perceived in his time. Now, we can understand a non-theistic formulation where "God" is no longer a being. Now, we can emerge from a dependence on supernatural to an interdependence on humanness.

John Spong in his book "A New Christianity for a New World" describes a God that no longer has a theism. Rather, God is "the ultimate source of life" in Tillich's sense of "the ground of all being" "One worships this God by living fully, by sharing deeply."⁸ We know that God through the "footprints of love".⁹ Thus God is also defined as "the ultimate source of love"

Our growing anxieties as identified by Spong in a post-modern context, may be addressed with worship that focuses on the continuance of the source of life that enables human existence.¹⁰ "One worships this god by loving wastefully, by spreading love frivolously, by giving love away without stopping to count the cost."¹¹

The history of humankind through its stories (religious and other) provide a memory of ways in which we have aided or destroyed our source of life. These memories give clues to avoid the mistakes of the past. Some human responses reflect what Spong calls 'footprints of love'. Does the historical Jesus, as defined by Marcus Borg in "Meeting Jesus for the First Time",¹² provide a particularly significant response as footprints that will continue as a benchmark by which humans may religiously focus on the ultimate source of love?

The writings which have emerged from the Jesus Seminar have helped in seeing Jesus as a man with particular insights at a particular time which provided a key to open the door to consider new ways of thinking for us. The quest for understanding the historical Jesus has led to recognition that the New Testament gospels not only emerged over decades as the oral tradition, but that it was expanded by interpretive comments, before becoming written.

In seeking to single out the probable historical words and actions of Jesus, the Jesus Seminar has re-enforced the insight of modern Biblical scholarship, namely the importance of realising that the thinking and expressions of the historical Jesus is a result of the assumptions and perspective of his time. As a Jew he was challenging the traditional Jewish interpretations.

The Jesus of Nazareth was indeed a unique event in the context of religious development that led to the Christian tradition. Jesus provided us with two things in particular:

1. An understanding of what it means to be fully human.

⁷ Lloyd Geering, *ibid* p141

⁸ John Spong "A New Christianity for a New World" p70

⁹ John Spong, *ibid* p71

¹⁰ John Spong, *ibid* ch2

¹¹ John Spong, *ibid* p72

¹² Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus for the First Time*

2. A method of action which Borg describes as subversive wisdom.¹³

In his life and death Jesus exhibited being fully human. Somewhere I read that the historical event of Jesus is described as a moment when there was a snapping of the tension between the fear of domination of God the creator and the fear of separation and isolation from God. Jesus became truly independent, yet returned to a relationship with God which was no longer dominated by these fears.¹⁴ Spong describes Jesus as possessing life so totally that he can give it away without fear.¹⁵

Borg summarises what Jesus provided as: "Put more compactly, the **way** is life in the Spirit. It is the life that Jesus himself knew. The transformation of perception to which Jesus invited his hearers flowed out of his spiritual experience. This seems to be the best explanation of Jesus' wisdom."¹⁶ This is what William James defines as *first-hand religion*¹⁷ (in contrast to 'second hand religion' that that one gains from others) and it is this that enables challenges to conventional religious wisdom.

It is this "Christ" event that has provided humankind with understanding that enabled fully human experience. Now we can discover an autonomy combined with mutual interdependence with each other, and with the environment. But these insights have come from a vision of possibilities that has traditionally been encapsulated as a concept that came from God. What Jesus said was in the context of his situation. The expression of the message of Jesus in that context may or may not be relevant to us in our day and age. But his method of "subversive wisdom" which challenged the "conventional wisdom" is very relevant to us. If Jesus was a sage who offered a subversive wisdom to the conventional Jewish wisdom¹⁸, can we now offer subversive wisdom in the spirit of Jesus that challenges even more of conventional wisdom?

Whether those in the Jesus Seminar have got their research into the "historical Jesus" correct is not important for me. What is valuable is that theologians have dared to explore hypotheses which offer the possibility of an alternate assumption to that of theism as the source of wellbeing for humankind.

Over my decades of theological thinking, my clinging to theism has blinkered the possibility of my consideration of humanness as being a force in its own right. I had continued to seek to reinterpret the hypotheses of many insightful thinkers in the 20th Century into interpretations that maintained a dependence on theism. In so doing I did not get it! Then I saw through the glass darkly.

If there is no theism, what then is Revelation?

The normal usage of the term "revelation" in the Christian tradition is as the manifestation of God's character and purpose in history to his chosen people culminating in the Christ.¹⁹ Revelation in the Bible is usually in stories remembered or words spoken by prophets. While not all prophets were initially readily accepted by their contemporaries, where there was a consensus with acceptance then that "revelation" was passed on through the generations. The events of Jesus have been spoken of as the supreme moment with the fullness of God's revelation made flesh.

If there is no theism then revelation is no longer something that is given from a source beyond humankind. Past conclusions that were considered as absolute truths from God can be critically reassessed. "Revelation" can simply be a new human understanding that gains a general consensus, which continues to be open to re-evaluation. In fact, if one is to be consistent with the

¹³ Marcus Borg, *ibid* p69f

¹⁴ Source unknown

¹⁵ John Spong "A New Christianity for a New World" p138

¹⁶ Marcus Borg, *ibid* p87

¹⁷ William James, Varieties of Religious Experience, p6

¹⁸ Marcus Borg, *ibid* p67f

¹⁹ Alan Richardson, A Dictionary of Christian Theology : p294

actions of Jesus, then we will need to dismiss those particular theological developments that now may seem to be inappropriate to our situation.

The implication of these thoughts is not a question about what is lost by these interpretations, rather it is a question of what is gained. No longer need we hide as dependent children behind the skirt of Creator Mother whom we describe as the authority figure of Father God. No longer need we be as a child, but may become adult. We are enabled to take responsibility of our destiny (with all its uncertainties) and share that responsibility with all other humans. Our prayers are not to a powerful intervening God, but to each other in taking responsibility for redeeming the effects of our "sins" or actions that are contrary to a general wellbeing.

Is there God?

The Chaos Theory which describes outcomes of appropriate balances within the whole of the environment, is suggestive of an explanation that does not require a God who organises procedures or predestines particular outcomes. At the commencement of the 21st Century our understanding of the universe suggests that there are mathematical explanations that show the "BIG BANG" as emerging out of an ongoing nothingness.²⁰ It is now suggested that the beginning of our universe was a chance eruption of many from the "nothingness". With this theory there is no longer the need of a divine creator who pushed the button.

There no longer seems to be a prescribed design that willed our experiences to occur. No longer does there seem to be a need for a God as described in traditional religious ways. The natural laws that we have been seeking to understand, are explained in Quantum theory as the result of an apparent chance process. What seems certain is that humanity could only evolve within the narrow boundaries of a particular set of conditions. It was by chance the universe happened to develop with a particular set of rules that enabled the conditions of our particular environment where humanity could evolve. That this occurred is perhaps the miracle to celebrate.

Perhaps the mystic phenomena that are seen as religious experiences are simply unexplained dynamics of life. These may be no more attributable to a god than are other physical phenomena as yet unexplained by scientific theories. Nevertheless, the human psyche in our current progress of evolution may still require ongoing formulations of visions or myths to feel comfortable. John Crossan suggests that humans may be "hard-wired" to have a need for a desire for a religion with a God.²¹

However I think that what we seek is the something that provides the vision for good outcomes, and it is that which may still be our god. The experience of hurt, particularly from fellow humans, makes it attractive to have a desire for an almighty protector. Emotionally I need something beyond me with a vision of optimum outcomes for our well being. Is there a source of "truth" that determines the process by which optimum outcomes may occur for our well being in the universe within which we live. Is what we seek the same as that which is described in the Bible as the Logos²². In earlier times we understood that this was sourced by a divine being who made it happen. In modern scientific understanding there are explanations that offer a process rather than a divine master plan.

Perhaps we have to trust that we are in an ongoing emerging process that is dependent on the part that we play, rather than prescribed destiny. As humans discover the appropriate balance of mutual behaviour which enables the continuity with optimum functionality within our environment, then we may be fulfilling the "Logos" as described in the Christian faith.

As a teenager I was asking if there really was a God? At that time the events in my life seemed to concur as answers to prayer. So I came to trust in the Christian tradition. My experience as part of the Christian tradition has served me well. It has supported me and provided the means through the Church to seek justice and offer love to fellow human beings. God provided that assurance of

²⁰ See ABC TV "Compass" aired 7/3/04

²¹ John Dominic Crossan, "A future for the Christian Faith?", The Once and Future Jesus: p115

²² The Gospel of John: ch1

an unseen truth in which I trusted. But now this has evolved into a vision of trusting a process of human inter-relationships as the source of justice.

There remains a sense of mystery. Whether this be a reality or merely a human desire, I know not. There is ongoing anecdotal evidence that suggests the possibility of dimensions which the human psyche influences or is influenced by. These may be forces that have been attributed to God.

Journeying with a new perspective!

An ideal of the destiny for humankind, as has been understood through eons by many religions, including the Christian traditions, is one of justice for all. Yet at any specific time an individual may nevertheless suffer injustice. Underlying this ideal there is the having of a respect for the environment that enables our life. Common in religious ideals is a seeking of justice tempered by love and respect for each human.

My perspective comes out of a Christian tradition. There is much of value from the Christian tradition that I affirm. The Jesus event remains for me a unique moment of the human history which not only has a very significant part in determining the context in which I now live, but continues to be a source for a perspective in addressing our future. Jesus addressed the context of his day. The insights that Jesus provided are as an example, (albeit as a unique pioneer), inspiring us in addressing the ossified thinking of the age in which we live. That is the clue on which I rely in determining my perspective; which continues as a faith journey. I am sure that there are many ways to the ideal, but the way of Jesus is my way.

Thus I may celebrate in ways that are consistent with the traditional Christian forms of worship.

- There is praise and awe as we marvel the mysteries of the source of life, and celebrate the insights that have evolved human understanding towards an ideal coexistence of humans.
- There is thanks and rejoicing for the created universe of which I am a part.
- There is dedication and commitment to seeking justice with compassion.
- There is confession and redemption of the actions of ourselves (and all humankind) that are inappropriate for the wellbeing in our universe.
- There is mutuality in the "Spirit" of fellowship and encouragement of the body of believers who seek as Jesus sought. In Jesus there is the unique example of being "Son" of the ideal. We may echo this in the sharing "The Lord's Prayer" as our claim of Jesus as Lord of the Way we travel.

But there are many traditional formula, creeds, and interpretations which need new meaning and changed wording if these are to remain useful to me.

So I journey on.

I now trust that the "truth" I seek lies in a process of healthy human interaction seeking mutually beneficial outcomes. Where I had been seeking certainty from a God with an all powerful assurance for the destiny of humankind, my faith now lies in trusting the possibilities of the human compassion. But that hope is undermined by the ongoing experiences of suffering that are the consequence of human injustice and lack of compassion. It is that uncertainty that my faith addresses.

My faith now lies in the ideal of the human spirit. I hope that love will win out, but it is not because a God has willed it so, it is because I trust that this is the ideal to which the human spirit will rise. It is an ideal that contains a mystery suggesting that somehow

there is something greater than the sum of the individuals; and it will happen despite the individuals. Perhaps that is the mystery (or god) by which my faith is sustained.