

September 15, 2019

Spiritual Migration: "A System of Beliefs or a Way of Life"

Hosea 6:6

Isaiah 43:18-19

John 2:13-22

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Brian McLaren recounts a conversation he has with a woman who has a son asleep in a stroller as they wait for their flights in the airport. The conversation led to what was he doing on his laptop. He answered, "writing a book." She then asked, "what is it about?" He tried to summarize it best he could. She responded with, "So you're saying that Christianity isn't very Christian anymore. You want Christianity to become more Christian. Is that right?" When he said, "yes", she responded "Good luck with that! By the look of things, it won't be easy. Try to get it worked out in time for my little boy, okay?"

The Jesus we encounter in the Gospels, wasn't at all impressed by people who said the correct word ("Lord, Lord") or engaged in impressive religious behaviors (prophesying, exorcising, or even performing miracle). Religious labels, displays or even words were not the point. Jesus makes that point when he says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord' did we not prophesy in your name, cast out demons in your name and do many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them 'I never knew you; go away from you, you evildoers.'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

If Jesus was to speak to today's Church would he be heard to say, "Not everyone who believes the Apostle's creed will enter the kingdom of heaven, not everyone who has said the

“sinner’s prayer” or believes in being born again or Spirit-filled, not everyone who believes in papal infallibility or biblical inerrancy, not everyone who believes in transubstantiation or baptism will enter the kingdom of heaven.

The problem of the modern day Church is not a matter of having the wrong beliefs. It’s a matter of believing the right beliefs are what matters most. We must understand the essence of our faith to be something other than a list of opinions, propositions or statements that the church holds but cannot prove.

In the Gospel of John, we heard about Jesus clearing out the temple of all animal sacrifices. What so bothered Jesus? Was it the high cost of animal blood which prevented the poor from purchasing the needed merchandise? If this were the case, then why didn’t Jesus allow the cheap doves to remain in the Temple, so the poor could buy them. Could it be that story has been given to us not to address greed and compassion for the poor!

Given his actions, could it not be that Jesus point of cleansing the temple was for us to realize we wanted the whole belief system associated with sacrifice based on the long-held belief that God is angry and needs to be appeased by blood. Jesus may have sought to turn that belief on its head, in the same manner that he overturned the tables in the temple.

The authorities then question Jesus authority to do such a thing. They want proof of his God-given authority to interrupt the annual ritual of Passover sacrifice – a ritual that God, they believe, mandated through Moses. Which was all to say, if in God’s name Jesus is upstaging a tradition that goes back to Moses, God better demonstrate the proper credentials! In

response, is Jesus say, “I will destroy and raise the temple in three days.”

Is Jesus making a revolutionary proposal about the temple crumbling? Saying the temple could crumble, but if it did that would not be the end of the world. If the temple and the whole sacrifice-appeasement industrial complex comes to an end, something better will rise from the rubble: a system of extravagant and generous grace, open to all people, devoid of appeasement in any form. A more loving, embodied way of relating to God, self, one another, and all of creation. What looked like an end is actually a doorway to a new beginning.

Jesus was saying, what the prophets Hosea and Isaiah said before him. He was not abandoning Jewish tradition. He was choosing to highlight the prophetic and mystical tradition, in contrast to the priestly tradition for whom beliefs matter most.

Our current reality as Church is that the priestly wings stills take up most of the religious real estate. And it is also true that they often presume to be the sole proprietors of orthodoxy and pronounce those who differ as heretics.

So, that then puts us in more than a bit of a dilemma – if Jesus dared to side with the prophetic tradition and suffer the wrath of the scholastic/priestly establishment, shouldn't we as his follower do the same when necessary.

Harvey Cox (Harvard theologian) notes that the rise of beliefs happened in the fourth century in the era of Constantine. And the interesting thing to note about that timing, is this is when the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. It is interesting to note that Emperor Constantine called for the council in 325 that gave us the Nicene Creed. Could it be that

this was the beginning of sleeping with Rome, with the government emphasizing belief over praxis, as a means of control and a way to determine who was in and who was out. It became an easy way to centralize power and an efficient way to test compliance with authorities. It turned out believing was now more about belonging than behaving, and more about politics, beginning when Christianity slept with Rome.

This history and acceptance and these agreements have moved the Christian faith from being about following the life and teaching of Jesus to a set of belief boxes that need to be checked off if one is to be considered Christian. We have gone from a movement of mercy, love, and justice set in motion by the prophets and continued and expanded by Jesus to a religion set in stone governed by priests and scholars who insist on orthodoxy for membership instead of discipleship by praxis; whose energy is given to a system of beliefs instead of a way of life.

Maya Angelou recounts that she was often been asked if she is a Christian. On the occasions of her being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom she responded, "I think, already? You already got it?" She went on to say, "I'm working at it, which means that I try to be as kind and fair and generous and respectful and courteous to every human being."

In conclusion, an excerpt from her poem, "And Still I Rise"

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise...

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise...  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

Jesus said, on the third day, I will rise. Will you? Will I? Will we? Will the Church?