



JNANADEEPA: Pune Journal of Religious Studies

PJRS ISSN P-0972-3331

ISSN P-0972-3331

20/1-2 Jan-Dec 2016: 297-311

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4272022

Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4272022>

Intellectual Challenges to Christianity

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Abstract: In this article, the author explores the intellectual challenges facing Christianity today. According to Ernst Troeltsch, the most important intellectual challenge to Christianity was the growing lack of appreciation of the essential content of the Christian message: the ethos of love, the view of the human person, the communitarian cult, and the centrality of Jesus Christ. If we reformulate these challenges for today's secularized and secularizing world, they are: the intellectual hegemony of values and cognitive assumptions that make the love ethos of Christianity unintelligible; an understanding of personality that contradicts the Christian understanding of the uniqueness of the person; an increasingly individualistic perception of spirituality; and the loss of the idea of Transcendence without which the notion of Jesus Christ as mediator between human and divine is impossible.

The author holds that the Catholic Church is best equipped to face all these challenges. But for that it must come out of its defences which is the case in many countries or it has withdrawn from public life. The Church must show that it can articulate its message afresh, the message about the Holy, the Messiah, the Prophet, etc. Only then will it continue to be relevant morally and spiritually. If the task of the Church is to accompany people on their pilgrimage as they search for the True, the Good and the Beautiful, in every age and place, there is no way of doing this without believing in reason,

and reasoning together, posing difficult questions and searching for new answers.

Keywords: Ernst Troeltsch, *intellige ut credas*, Love ethos, human dignity, Transcendence.

The Roman historian Tacitus called Christianity “one more contemptible superstition, an additional evidence of the sad capacity of human beings to believe strange things.”¹ But Christianity turned out to be something quite different, in fact, a substantial astonishment for everyone. That a movement beginning with a breakaway group within Judaism should end by capturing the imperial palace could hardly have been foreseen by anyone. One reason for it was the intellectual power of Christianity which the great Fathers of the Church convincingly proved to their contemporaries. As the great theologian Origen maintained, there is a precise distinction between the *dogmata* of the Church’s tradition which had to be maintained and the *problemata* which needed to be discussed.² The intimate relationship between faith and reason was summed up by Augustine’s famous sayings: *crede ut intelligas*, because understanding was a reward of faith, and *intellige ut credas*, for one is not able to believe without reason.³ No one in fact believes “if he has not first thought it necessary to believe. It is reason which shows “who is to be believed” and thus “even faith has eyes with which it sees that what it does not yet see is nevertheless true.”⁴ Therefore, in *De Trinitate* Augustine defined theology as “the science which generates, nourishes, defends and fortifies faith... for it is one thing to know only that which must be believed in order to obtain the blessed life... and another to know it in such a way as to be able to place it at the service of the good and to defend it against the bad.”⁵ So a fundamental principle of Augustine’s theological method was the ardent desire to arrive at an understanding of the faith and the employment towards this end of all human resources. The history of theology is the

history of the attempt to understand the faith and enjoyment of the Truth, which constitutes the highest good for human beings.

That it is an important task today is clearly stated by Pope Francis: “Proclaiming the Gospel message to different cultures also involves proclaiming it to professional, scientific and academic circles. This means an encounter between faith, reason and the sciences with a view to developing new approaches and arguments on the issue of credibility, a creative apologetics which would encourage greater openness to the Gospel on the part of all. A theology – and not simply a pastoral theology – which is in dialogue with other sciences and human experiences is most important for our discernment on how best to bring the Gospel message to different cultural contexts and groups.”⁶

Everybody will agree that the world has changed, and so has the Church’s place in the world; to dream of a return of the world and the Church of the “good old days” is a decoy, an illusion, and it rests on the sacralization of one historical form of the Catholic Church. During the Synod of Bishops on New Evangelization, 2012, one of the participants said: “Our beautiful Christian faith is too complicated: the terms, their content and their explanation. We bathe in an ensemble of dogmas, of mysteries: the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, Redemption, the Sacraments...These dogmas must be interpreted in a form capable of touching upon daily life, human aspirations, happiness and prosperity, the daily realities of our faithful.”⁷

In many Catholic and Christian countries, to the question, “to what Church do you belong,” one gets increasingly the answer, “none.” Many people have come to believe that what they learned as children about the nature of God can be erased as fairy tales. The culture that surrounds us focuses on science, growing out of the long history of Copernicus, Darwin, Freud,

Einstein and Hawking. Still, most people are not atheists but agnostics, still searching even as they entertain doubts about God. There is need for a new conversation about God, one that shows people that God is not an old man with a long white beard. God is infinite and unlimited. God is incomprehensible to our finite minds. This is not easy to grasp. We surmise that God is spirit, straddling the universe and parallel universes. At the same time God is intimate to each of us. We cannot prove his existence by reason, nor can science disprove God's existence.

Many people say that they relate to God personally and do not need a Church. We applaud this personal relationship, but it is also truly human to do things in community. But there is a reason for the rejection of the Church. They ask what caused the Church over the centuries to underestimate the Gospel's core messages, love and compassion. People also have other serious issues that loom large on their horizon: the morality of world economics, spiritual life, human sexuality, peace and war, the poor and their suffering, etc. So the main challenge the Church faces today is to relearn how to communicate a deeper, more intelligent and more relevant religion that leads to a life of love, compassion, justice and peace. How to remain in contact with the millions of people who look for God but not come to Church? This is the background of my reflection on the intellectual challenges to Christianity today.

A century ago, the German Philosopher Ernst Troeltsch published an article about the future of Christianity.⁸ In fact, he spoke not only about the future of Christianity but of religion in general. Against all pessimism, Troeltsch saw the possibility of a reformed and revitalized Christianity provided it addressed the intellectual challenges facing it. According to him, the most important intellectual challenge to Christianity was the growing lack of appreciation of the essential content

of the Christian message: the ethos of love, the view of the human person, the communitarian cult, and the centrality of Jesus Christ. If we reformulate these challenges for today's secularized and secularizing world, they are: the intellectual hegemony of values and cognitive assumptions that make the love ethos of Christianity unintelligible; an understanding of personality that contradicts the Christian understanding of the uniqueness of the person; an increasingly individualistic perception of spirituality; and the loss of the idea of Transcendence without which the notion of Jesus Christ as mediator between human and divine is impossible.⁹ A few words about each of these would be in order.

1. The Love Ethos of Christianity

The world today is characterized by increasing individualism and there are mainly two types of individualism. The first is "utilitarian individualism" which is a utility-oriented understanding of life and relationships. Everything is judged by its utility for immediate and often material profit and personal enjoyment, and therefore, life is basically making clever choices and developing strategies to achieve these goals. The second type of individualism is "expressive individualism" which maintains that the goal of life is self-expression and self-realization of the individual and the satisfaction of one's material and emotional needs. According to the American Sociologist Robert Bellah, the two sociological types that symbolize these two types of individualism are the American "Manager" and "Therapist."¹⁰ According to him, there can be serious conflicts between these two types of individualism. One example was the revolt of the 1960s and 1970s by the expressive young generation in the West against the utility oriented worldview of their fathers. Another option is not to make a choice between the two types of individualism but to try to harmonize them, symbolized by the "Yuppie Culture" of the 1980s. Self absorbed, rich, given

to demonstrably high consumption, they are out of touch with most of the challenges and concerns of others and live their life unperturbed, concerned only with the fulfilment of their desires. The entire financial system of the capitalist world, its business philosophy and strategies, its banking system, and indeed, the whole science of economics are dominated by these types of individualism. The crises in the financial markets during the last few years did offer some occasion for a rethink, but now, business is as usual once again.

As against these two types of egocentric or even narcissistic individualism Robert Bellah proposed two other types of individualism, the “Republican” and the “Biblical.” The word “Republican” has nothing to do with the political party with that name, but refers to a political tradition which goes back to the city-state republics of Athens and Rome and the Italian city states of the Middle Ages. The citizens played an active role in political life and had a say in its affairs. It was expected from them that they act virtuously which meant they should not do anything which goes against the common good, because the common good is more important than personal benefits and individual self-realization. Although such an attitude was very commendable, it was unmistakably clear that the common good of my republic was more important than that of the other.

The alternative to this is the biblical notion, which has its origin in the Judeo-Christian tradition. According to the biblical tradition, human beings are morally obliged in their decisions to look beyond their family, city, republic, country, religion or class. That is what the Bible means by “love your neighbour as yourself,” irrespective of whether one belongs to one’s group, class, religion, family or country. That is the core of Christian morality. Of course it is yet to be demonstrated satisfactorily why human beings should be motivated to act in this way in order to live a morally correct life or why one is not acting morally when one acts in pure self-interest. It is also not

shown why one should be sensitive to the sufferings of others, which does not belong to the sphere of rational arguments.

Herein lies the superiority of the Christian love ethics over other moral systems and the different forms of individualism discussed above. But it is an intellectual challenge to show to the utilitarian, egocentric and expressive individualisms their limits, to the republican individualism its parochialism and to a purely rational global ethical system its irrelevance for concrete human life. No discussion on morality will be able to avoid the discussion on justice and love as its central components and both are foundations of the Christian moral teaching. The Christian concepts of unconditional love and justice are based on the concept of a God who loves human beings unconditionally and acts justly. The intellectual challenge to Christians today is to present all these as matters of great relevance and urgency for the globalized world today, and show that Christians are not, in the words of Max Weber, representatives of an “a-cosmic” love ethos. They believe in love and justice in the here and now, and both are indispensable for a new social and political order.¹¹ But it is a difficult task today to prove the superiority of Christian morality when the credibility of the Church’s teaching on moral goodness is questioned on many counts.

2. The Human Person

Perhaps the most spectacular intellectual challenge to Christianity today is confronting the reductionist naturalism that is propagated vigorously. Researches in Neurosciences, Genetics, Socio-biology, etc. claim to establish that there is no difference between human and animal behaviour, that human life is a purely biological and chemical phenomenon, thus challenging the religious world view of the vast majority of human beings. This reductionist naturalism rejects such concepts such as freedom, symbolization, etc. The debate

has been with us since the nineteenth century but now it finds greater echo in the public.¹²

Such a worldview has consequences for the Church and its understanding of the human person. There is need for a new articulation of the Christian understanding of personality. Christianity believes in the unique dignity of the human person who is created in the image and likeness of God and is endowed with an immortal soul. Unfortunately, history shows that respect for the human person and his dignity were the fruits of hard struggles by other institutions than the Church. The human person was not the yardstick of the Church's actions, which is clearly shown in its opposition to democracy, human rights, etc. for centuries. These were the achievements of anti-Christian movements like the French Revolution, the American War of Independence, etc. It is good to ask what role the Churches played in the history of human rights, abolition of torture, abolition of slavery, discrimination against women, discrimination against sexual minorities, etc. Did not Christianity justify the upholding of structures which were against the Christian understanding of the human person? This is a major secular criticism against Christianity. The idea of the person as unique, created in the image of God, with dignity and inalienable rights is not what we see in the history of the Church with its brutal suppression of the rights of people in the name of truth, authority and obedience. The intellectual challenge for the Church today is to investigate self-critically and objectively the inter-relationship between Christianity and the sacralisation of the human person and draw appropriate conclusions for our engagement in the world today and put the dignity of the human person at the centre of its teaching and ministry.

3. Spirituality

Modern person has an understanding of spirituality that is at odds with that of the Church. Many people candidly confess that they have spiritual experiences where we least suspect it: in art, aesthetics, erotic love, confrontation with existential crises, like illness, death, loss of loved ones, etc. Modern person spares no energy in his/her search for exotic spiritual experiences and rituals. S/he believes that spirituality is a very personal affair and the Church is nowhere in their scheme of things. The Church is even seen as a hindrance to spiritual growth.

Believing and practicing Christians, in fact, encounter the incomprehension of their contemporaries for their continuance in the Church in spite of their having serious problems with it. This incomprehension is the result of the view that is almost taken for granted today that social organizations must be based on free association of the members, and therefore, anything that places the institution before or above the individual should be rejected. The claim of the Church that it is a supra-personal reality capable of leading people to faith and self-realization contradicts the individualistic tendencies of our age.

Those who hold this view do not understand what the Church is, that it is not a “cultic club,” an organization merely meant for the communal celebration of rituals, and that it has a transpersonal character. It is true that even within Christianity, there are different understandings of community, with some, like the Catholics, Anglicans and Orthodox Christians having a more universal community consciousness, while some Protestants, like the Free Churches and Congregationalists have less of it. Let us take the Catholic Church. Historically it stressed for a long time an authoritarian, hierarchical and excessively centralized form, although the theological core of the Church as a community of agape or love was not totally forgotten. The Christian Creed speaks of the Church as “one,

holy, catholic and apostolic,” one but not uniform, holy but also sinful and so in need of reform, missionary like the apostles and catholic which means trans-cultural, transnational and so concretely universal. In spite of all the differences, the Christians have something in common.¹³ Charles Taylor, in his book *A Secular Age* called the Church a *Network of Agape*. According to him, the lifeblood of the Church is agape and not a set of rules and regulations. It is nourished by relationships and when it is extended to the other a network is established. In this sense, the Church is a Network-society, but of a special kind, because the relationship that its members share is not that of a family, clan or tribe. In the Church, relationships exist that transcend familiar categories, like the family, clan or tribe. The only basis of relationships in the Church is agape. It is a special experience that binds the members together in the community.¹⁴ The challenge before the Church today is to make this community attractive once again, as a place of spiritual experience which satisfies the individual and does justice to the community and show that spirituality and community do not exclude each other as many people tend to think today, that spirituality in its different hues and colours is possible also in a community, particularly in the Church.

4. Transcendence

The next challenge is to face the loss of the idea of Transcendence, not the watered down understanding of Transcendence by which we mean anything that goes beyond the ordinary, but the Judeo-Christian understanding, the total otherness of divinity, a radical desacralization of the present and its political and social structures, as the Prophets of the Old Testament proclaimed it which the Christian faith continues to uphold. This understanding of Transcendence is integral to the Christian faith. Here we are faced with two challenges: the first is the conflict between the specifically Christian understanding of Transcendence in the form of the Trinity and the Jewish and

Islamic understanding of pure monotheism and the need for a dialogue which calls for great intellectual acumen; the second is to go behind the open and conscious assault of philosophy, culture and politics to de-transcendentalize reality and to offer possibilities of human self-realization in political and cultural ideologies as we experienced in National Socialism, post-revolutionary Communism, etc. That such ideologies are at work again is clear to everyone and it is the task of a post-totalitarian Christianity to confront such trends intellectually.

Karl Jaspers has traced the origin of the idea of Transcendence to the so-called Axial Age, the period between 800 and 200 BC.¹⁵ Its potential for challenging a one-sided anthropocentrism and absolutisation of this worldly structures and institutions was emphasized by the Prophets of the Old Testament. The Abrahamic religions have continued this tradition. He also discussed the similarities and differences between Semitic and Eastern religions, like Buddhism and Confucianism. So in spite of the popularity of the theory of the “Clash of Civilizations” which the present day context tends to endorse, there is still need for a rediscovery of the commonalities of all religions and an alliance of all of them against all forms of narrow-mindedness and exclusivism, including the blanket rejection of Transcendence. The political and moral potential of this idea in the contemporary world for resisting political, religious and cultural ideologies and in combating radicalism, fanaticism and fundamentalism needs to be explored and that is an intellectual challenge addressed to the Church.

Of course there are other challenges, too, but these touch upon the core of the Christian message. The ecological crisis, the grave danger posed by an unregulated financial market, the immensely destructive potential of science and technology, the scandal of world hunger and malnutrition, the injustice

inherent in international politics, etc. should concern the Church, indeed all religions and all human beings.

One could ask why the whole question of sexual morality is not presented as one of the serious challenges before the Church. If Christianity takes the love commandment seriously, all problems of sexual morality can be resolved. When the law of love takes the backstage and questionable anthropological and legal postulates take the centre stage problems crop up. Then in sexuality procreation of children will be given a false priority to expression of love. Homosexuality will become a sin instead of an expression of love between two human beings. Celibacy of priests will not be misunderstood as enmity towards sex but as liberative asceticism for the service of others.

Then there is another alleged challenge, the so-called dictatorship of relativism popularized by Pope Benedict XVI. It is to be genuinely doubted whether there is such a danger as dictatorship of relativism. The number of people who theoretically profess an epistemological or moral relativism is arguably very small and so a dictatorship of this small group over the vast majority of human beings is not a serious danger. What is true is that pluralism of philosophical, epistemological and moral systems is a fact of reality. There will be competition among them in their claim to truth. In this context it must be said that the Church also has the duty to critically analyse its own truth claims. The standpoint of the Church for a long time that faith is equal to obedience to a set of doctrines of a highly institutional and authoritarian Church was a mistake. This sacralisation of institutions instead of measuring everything against the holiness of God cost the Church dearly. The Church has to face the challenges from competing ideologies and religions through the attractive and convincing power of the Good News of Jesus. This is a serious intellectual challenge. The church cannot function like a quasi

state and still lack the guarantees of a constitutional state. It is not transparent, is bureaucratically top heavy, without many of the guarantees for the protection of individual rights and structures of institutional self-reform.¹⁶ This has cost the Church much in terms of credibility in recent times.¹⁷

5. Conclusion

The Catholic Church is best equipped to face these challenges. In order to do so, it must come out of its defences which is the case in many countries or it has withdrawn from public life. The Church must show that it can articulate its message afresh, the message about the Holy, the Messiah, the Prophet, etc. Only then will it continue to be relevant morally and spiritually. If the task of the Church is to accompany people on their pilgrimage as they search for the True, the Good and the Beautiful, in every age and place, there is no way of doing this without believing in reason, and reasoning together, posing difficult questions and searching for new answers.

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Article received: Feb 3, 2016

Article approved: Aug 22, 2016

No of words: 4090



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Pennacchio, Salvatore: His Grace Pennacchio is an Archbishop and diplomat of the Holy See. On 8 May 2010, Pope Benedict XVI appointed him Apostolic Nuncio to India and from 13 November 2010 to Nepal. On 6 August 2016, Pope Francis appointed him Apostolic Nuncio to Poland.

PT Joseph: Dr Joseph is a Jesuit belonging to Jamshedpur Province. He has his Ph.D. in Electrical and Computer Engineering, Marquette University, USA, 1992 and M.B.A. St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, USA, 1987. He completed his M.Th. from JDV, Pune, 1986. He was the Director, Xavier Institute of Management, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, 2002-2007. He has authored many outstanding books.

Tarimo, Teresa: Rev Teresa is a Holy Spirit Sister. She pursued her Theological studies at Jordan University in Morogoro Tanzania, she worked at Rauya Theological Pastoral Centre as a Teacher. Then she got her Licentiate and Doctorate in Moral theology at the University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome (2014). Currently she teacher and Principal at Rauya Theological Pastoral Centre, Tanzania

Thomas, Eugenia: Sr Thomas born in Moshi, Tanzania. She joined the Holy Spirit Sisters in 1975. After being a Representative General Superior from 2003 to 2007 she studied Philosophy and Theology in JDV. Then she taught at the Theological Pastoral Institute Rauya. She was elected General Superior in 2008 and served till 2014.

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