

Witney Way Harvest 2011

“Christianity or Churchianity?”

As an unashamed non-conformist liberal, I have no difficulty sticking my head above the parapet, and declaring that the only reason I defected from the Methodists, my father being one of their ministers, was because of the “*hymn sandwich*” style of service, and my need for high liturgy; nothing to do with episcopacy. Surprising really, since like banks, we are told that people are loyal, and rarely change the habits of a lifetime.

Some years ago I was lecturing *up north*, and ventured into the famous Leeds Parish Church for mid-week choral evensong. The choir of some 16 boy choristers and 10 men, was sublime ... and the congregation numbered just four souls, including myself. I was put in mind of William Cobbett writing in “From Dover to Wen” describing a visit to Winchester Cathedral in 1825, “...*there were at this service, two or three men and five or six boys in white surplices, with a congregation of fifteen women and four men!*” – they were doing well!

The sexton (*read churchwarden*) in Ronald Blythe’s “*Akenfield*” (1830) confided, “*I’m not a Christian ... I go to church every Sunday, but nobody speaks to me unless they want something.*”

Simon Hoggart in his “Christmas Letters” passes this on, “*Ruthie (ten) ... is preparing for Confirmation next year, as an Anglican, a Roman Catholic, or both.*”

The Rt Hon Andy Burnham in an interview in “Third Way” in March 2011 said, “*I feel the church has got less and less forgiving, and its rhetoric more hard-line ... more austere and more judgmental. They alienate someone like me*”, a Catholic.

Or as Jon Kuhrt, the Director of Social Work at the West London Missions says, “*It is vital that Christians live out their faith publicly, rather than settling for the deathly cosiness of private beliefs expressed in sanctified settings.*”

“I found Jesus compelling. But church didn’t seem very interesting ... I always had a running list of questions.”
(US Pastor Bob Bell)

“There are lots of people who have some affinity for Jesus, but they go and visit a church, and they just can’t stomach the sort of package (they are presented with).”
(US Pastor Bob Bell)

“There are lots of agnostics who think about religion much more deeply than some who call themselves very religious and don’t think any further.” (Elif Shafak)

“There is sometimes a gap between the scholar, who concentrates solely on the surface, on the word, the rules and regulations ... and the other approach which is

much more holistic, more mystical, that wants to see what is beyond and underneath, and looks for the inner meaning. ” (Elif Shafak)

So forgive me if I confess to a little confusion. Each ten-year national census demonstrates that people are much more spiritual than church attendance statistics might suggest. Why do many people only seek the Church for hatchings, matchings, and despatchings? or turn up at Christmas and Easter, but shun attendance at other times; or pray when all else fails? But friends, keep it in perspective, cathedral attendances are increasing; and more people go to church on Sunday than attend football matches on Saturday, and that's official.

Christianity was first personal, and with time led to social and political reforms. Christianity has been a cause for great good throughout history and throughout the World, responsible for the development of, hospitals and care for the sick and elderly, education at all levels, the elimination of slavery, the emancipation of women, the study of philosophy, theology and law ... Christianity has been the inspiration for artists, sculptors, composers, writers, poets, architects ... this is God in action through humankind.

Churchianity however, has been responsible for a catalogue of bullyings, threatenings, tortures, punishments, killings, and other atrocities: the crusades, Holy Wars and sectarian uprisings, the inquisitions, the persecution and expulsion of Jews, from Britain as well as many other European countries, the witch hunts, the suppression of the Bible, the corruption of the clergy from Popes downwards... I don't need to elaborate, it's all available on-line.

In 1832, Rev H.H.Milman wrote to the Secretary of the poor law commission: *“The workhouse should be a place of hardship, of coarse fare, of degradation and humility; it should be administered with strictness – with severity ...”*

Where was Jesus' teachings, his commandments and his example, when all this was going on? I know what you'll say, *“... but it wasn't as bad as the regimes under Stalin, Hitler or Pol Pot.”* But that's hardly a relevant argument or comparison.

You know, Mahatma Gandhi once said, *“I love your Christ, but I hate your Christians, they are so unlike Him.”* What an indictment. But there does appear to be something of a mismatch between Christianity and Churchianity, between Christ and His followers. As the old adage has it, *“It's not lack of leadership, it's lack of followership.”*

Alister McGrath says, *“We must be critical of our beliefs, subjecting them to interrogation.”* So then “Why” I ask, “do you / do you not, go to church?” What are the questions, queries and issues which concern you? What are the stumbling blocks? The list below is from an on-going, on-line research project, gleaning material for a book, not I hasten to be written by me; I know who I *want* to write it, but I haven't asked them yet!

Philosophy and Theology

God and Jesus

“Jesus is a living person; God is an obscure being.”

It’s all too much the average person, too many ambiguities, and not enough reality for the modern environment. Too much pomp, ceremonies and rituals.

(Is it out of respect for God, if so, why should this be necessary, surely God never asked for all this. c.f. Amos ch5 vv18-24)

Our concept of God is too small. We imagine Father Christmas and not God, Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent. Were the whole power of God to be revealed, we would be compelled to comply. Had God wanted robotic obedience, He would have caused that to be created, as in the physical world. “One volunteer is better than three pressed men.”

Why did God bother? Did He have a need to be worshipped, or did He want to reveal Himself to sentient beings for any other reason?

If God is omnibenevolent why does he allow/inflict such suffering from natural disasters?

Why doesn’t he intervene to prevent suffering as he did in Sodom and Gomorrah, the Great Flood, sending His son etc?

If God is omniscient and omnipotent, why did He make a world with so many design faults ie tectonic plates causing earthquakes, tsunamis etc., ? If God is omnipotent, can he make a stone he can’t lift?

If faith is belief without evidence, isn’t such belief irrational? Why does He require faith rather than just revealing Himself?

Why would God, if He is caring and compassionate, “*visit the sins of the fathers upon the children even unto the third and fourth generations*” ? (Deut 5:9)

Why is God a jealous God? (Exodus 20: 4-5) Can you be completely loving and jealous at the same time?

Why, if God can perform miracles of healing, (Lourdes etc.) has He never replaced lost limbs? Doesn’t He love amputees? If He performs miracles and has the power of healing, why doesn’t He cure everyone? Or, for that matter, why doesn’t he abolish all disease?

If God is omnipotent, can He make a stone He can’t lift? Fallacy of omnipotence!

Who were the Pharisees the Sadducees and the Levites, and what did they believe?

Do animals have souls? If not, where is the cut off point between man and beast? Sentient beings?

Why did Christ choose only male disciples? Couldn’t he see that it would be used to justify sexism in appointing women bishops?

When did Jesus become God? Was He God at the Crucifixion; because why did He cry to his Father, “Why have you deserted me?”

How can a war be “justified” when Jesus said, “Love your neighbour” “Turn the other cheek”?

How does Jesus dying on the cross, forgive our sins? Why didn't God just forgive the sins of believers without the crucifixion?

Ultimately, isn't it all between me and my Maker?

Surely the Kingdom of God / Heaven is NOW-HERE or NO-WHERE

Jesus brought people together as a cohesive whole – the “Whole” being “God”, to which people could turn in happiness and sadness; to provide an anchor for their lives; a system/framework in which to live their lives. It took them away from the self and taught them to “treat others as one wished to be treated” (The Golden Rule) *Judging by the number of wars in the name of religion – this has not and is not working! But Jesus would still expect us to forgive our enemies!*

Science

How do we reconcile Biblical and physical truths?

Time/space began with the Big Bang, is God outside all dimensional understanding?
Is it “*turtles all the way down*”?

What are we supposed to believe: Evolution vv Creation

If He was able to create the earth and everything in it, why did he choose evolution, a slow and inefficient process, as the development mechanism?

Isn't it the case that most scientists and philosophers are atheists or agnostics? See the updated work of James H Leuba, Isn't religious belief merely a mental crutch of the ignorant?

Why do we go on talking about carbon-based life? Why don't we consider God having created other forms of life? *"There is a very good saying that if triangles invented a god, they would make him three-sided."* (Montesquieu)

If, as believers say, you need God as a first cause, who created God? If God could have existed for all eternity, why could the same not apply to the universe?

Personal Belief

If we *genuinely* repent of our misdoings, and our sins are forgiven, why are we to be judged at the last day?

Can you be a good person, even an exemplary person, but not believe in God? Only believers can get into Heaven (John 14:16) “...no one comes to the Father except through me...”

Can I be a Christian and not believe in life after death? Is it all “pie-in-the-sky-when-I-die?”

How much of The Creed do I have to believe?

Will I understand any of this if/when I get to heaven?

How do I know if prayer works? In prayer, the Church gives God the credit for the things which go right, but is silent when there are *seemingly* no responses. If God listens to prayers, why do so many apparently go unanswered?

"Death is a fact of life." So why do we use so many euphemisms for it, and not talk about it?

What is "sin"? - missing the target, alienation from God. Does sin have to be a conscious act?

Ultimately, what do I need to believe to be a Christian? Not what the church tells me. Surely I don't have to attend church to be a Christian?

For me there have always been too many doubts, but that doesn't stop me trying to do unto others, as I would have them do unto me.

Doesn't the Kingdom of God or the Second Coming mean by Grace, NOW if we receive it, NOT at some time in the future?

I don't think we need to live in the fear of God, but simply to relate to the teachings of Jesus. We become distanced from the idealism of this by the very nature of our existence. Perhaps the church brings us back into line.

Church

I've realised from this that it was Churchianity which first put me off Christianity, and ultimately that which put me off faith altogether. Jesus was undoubtedly a 'top bloke' (apologies if you find that offensive) and the concept of God can be tremendously powerful in a positive way towards GOoDness, but I've learnt in recent years that I don't need to believe in the existence of some super being to give my life purpose, meaning, fulfilment and (I hope) share goodness with others.

The church today is a long way from Jesus. It is a mish-mash of Jesus, Yes, but mixed in with pagan myths and legend, rituals, calendars ... Too much pomp & ceremony.

Mark's Gospel, the earliest - and St John's the non-synoptic and more esoteric, do not mention the Virgin Birth. Why has the story and the figure of Mary assumed such huge proportions? It contributes nothing except to emphasis that Jesus was different from other "humans".

The Virgin Birth was a copy from many other religions of the time.

Why did the Church invent the notions of Original Sin and The Fall and The Immaculate Conception? How are they relevant to Jesus' teaching and life? They are just a layers built up to embolden and sustain the Church's corporate structure and political muscle ... playing on ignorance, fear and superstition.

If a heresy is a deviation from orthodoxy; and orthodoxy is just a canon decided by men, then the orthodoxy might be the heresy and vice versa.

If the very early church was largely run by women in their homes, why are some churches currently so preoccupied with women priests and now women bishops? The Anglican Bishop of Christchurch, New Zealand is a woman, Victoria Matthews. The Methodist church in USA has had women bishops for years. (*"When Women were Priests"* Karen Jo Torjensen)

Synagogos (Greek) meant houses in which Jews met. Jesus met a lot of women!

The hierarchy of the Church was established in 160 (Archbishops, bishops, priest & deacons) governed by the Pope. *By whom?* Not totally successful until Pope Leo the Great 440-461

How far did Constantine and Nicea distort the teachings of Jesus for political ends?

How can the meddling activities of the Monarchs and State in the 16th century, be in any way Christian? (The dissolution of the monasteries and the handing over of land to Lords, the sale of church treasurers to fund wars, The 1533 Act of Restraint of appeals, and 1534 Act of Supremacy, and the stream of injunctions stating what should and should not be practiced in churches.)

The 17th cent. Puritans were as bad as Henry VIII for desecrating churches, and killing off feast days and ale brewing.

The early English (Catholic) church was the hub of the community – entertainment & sport on Sundays after church. That was all ruined at the Reformation; it polarised the church and state, and split communities.

17th cent. pluralism until 1838; clerical dynasties by upper class priests, alienated working class.

The church now, seems to be a glorified fund raising club, only relevant to those who are fearful of the wrath of God if they turn their back on the church.

How can Churches justify their wealth? Where is Jesus' , "*Sell all that you have and give to the poor.*"

How much of the Church's belief is man-made mumbo-jumbo? Why is the church always telling us what we CANNOT do, and not what we can do? Where is Jesus' teaching and example in it all?

How can anyone, in this scientific age, actually believe in transubstantiation?

How / Why are Episcopacy, the Apostolic Succession relevant?

As a child I was always told to be good "...or you won't go to heaven". Now that I have "... put away childish things ...", I'm told I can't *earn* grace, it comes through *wanting* it, – *justification by faith!*

There is no mention of the Holy Trinity in the Bible – again another man-made concept which has caused so much misunderstanding & misinterpretation.
And the schism in 1054 between Eastern and Western Churches.

In some churches the "Trinity" now seems to be Father, Son, and *Mother*". How can we make any sense of the Trinity? How can three entities form one God? Isn't it just an attempt at rationalising the illogical?

Is the Holy Spirit female, since in Aramaic the word is feminine – would it matter anyway?

Why is the church seemingly so hung-up on sex? homosexuality, contraception, adultery, fornication, abortion, IVF, celibate priests and hence abuses. Is it a throw-back to St. Augustine's ashamedness for his youth?

The history of the church is riddled with hypocrisy – Bishops of Winchester and the nuns Winchester Geese (prostitutes) and Bishop Gardiner procuring for Henry VIII "Many of London's most attractive churches were actually built on the proceeds of prostitution." (Catherine Arnold City of Sin) ... not to mention the Borgias!

RC priests were not barred from marriage or required to be celibate, until the Council of Trent 1545. Why did the change the law?

Dr Daly former RC Bishop of Derry, has called for a relaxing of celibacy rules for priests. What a total irrelevance to ordinary people.

Isn't it a nonsense that married RCs can become deacons and priests - provide they give up sex - but not Bishops? What does it mean to say that celibacy is a discipline not a doctrine? Supposedly based on

Jesus' life and example of celibacy; how do we know? It was very unusual in those times for a Jewish lad over 14 not to be married.

If the clergy are to relate to modern society, the needs of many people are not being met in a public place (church) where talk is of God's doings. Many need individual meetings – counselling. Many clergy back off when confronted with personal questions.

As divorcees, and both member of a CofE church council, why could my wife and I not get married in church, but could immediately receive the church's blessing after marrying in a Register Office? Not a problem with other denominations.

Pope Gregory IX decided in 1234 that he alone would decide who could be a saint. Before that it was a process of popular acclaim. What's a saint anyway? A very good person, an award, a bit like a modern day gong.

If Pope Pius IX in 1870 declared himself and his successors "infallible", why then are there so many problems within the church? c.f. Vatican II

Pope Pius XII was elected in 1939 remained silent throughout the war about the Nazi Holocaust even though he knew it was happening. In fact he allowed the Vatican to be used a way of moving Nazi war criminals into Africa and Latin America.

The persecution of Jews goes back to Greek and Roman times, but the Christian demonising of Jews goes back to the belief that the Jews were responsible for killing Jesus. Jews enjoyed greater religious liberty in Muslim countries than in Christian ones.

Muhammad died in 632. In his last sermon to 120,000 pilgrims on Mount Arafat, he told them to abandon feuds and in-fighting and preached tolerance. "An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab." What happened? The Koran is very anti war and suicide.

Why are *fundamentalists* of any persuasion or faith, so intolerant; or is that what *fundamentalism* means?

There is no religion that does not seek to make others "wrong". If Christianity is the *right* way, how can all those of other faiths, and no faith, all be *wrong* – or are *they* right as well!! With so many world religions, why should we believe Christianity is the true one?

Is it a coincidence that people born in a Christian country become Christians, those born in a Muslim country become Muslims etc. Isn't religious belief merely an accident of birth?

Is it the same God for Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus ...? Just a matter of interpretation?

Is there a "right" and a "wrong" denomination – RCs, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Quakers ...?

Why are the *new-atheists* so intolerant?

Why is Christianity so against Communism? Jesus was the ultimate Communist.

How do all these things relate to a God?

What belongs to *Christianity*; God-made, and what belongs to *Churchianity*; man-made?

How come, all Christian denominations have falling membership except the Pentecostal church in South America? (1900 – 50,000 1990 50 million) Does it tell us something about the religion or something about the people? Or both. (Emphasis on the Spirit and healing – working class c.f. CoE)

Is the Exodus Church in Holland – part of the Pentecostal Church in the Netherlands (PKN) – a heresy? Or can we have "somethingism" instead of God? Can Christianity stand apart from Jesus?

Why is the church always telling us what we cannot do and not what we can do? (Except raise money for charity and the Church.

We do not need to attend church to be a Christian person.

The Bible

In what sense is The Bible, the word of God? It was not dictated c.f. the Koran. Inspired by God? The Old Testament stories, myths and legends are surely just man's interpretation of things metaphysical, at the time. Hence the changing idea of God from "to be feared" to "loving".

Who decided on the canonical selection of books in the Old Testament and in the New Testament?
What of all the other gospels c.f. Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea Scrolls?
And when? Before or after Nicea? (Council of Trent in C16th)

Adam & Eve: was this *really* "The Fall" or man's awakening to the fact he could now think for himself?

How can the Bible be taken seriously when it contains so many inconsistencies contradictions?
eg God commanded killing (Ex 32:27) but forbids killing in Ex 20:13. *The Lord is good to all* (Psalm 145:6) evil. *I make peace and evil. I the Lord do all these things*, (Isaiah 45:7)

Surely the Bible must be read and interpreted personally; it is allegorical, mythological & metaphorical, NOT literal.

How far did the Evangelists distort the facts to suit their differing audiences; particularly when the second coming didn't happen as quickly as they had anticipated?

Why do Christians believe morality comes from Bible/faith in Christ when both conflict with modern morality in many ways? eg Place of women - "as the church submits to Christ, so also should wives submit to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:22-24) Slavery, "*slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything*" (Colossians 3:22) Sunday observance- "*whoever does any work on the Sabbath shall be put to death*" (Exodus 31:15) etc.

Why are the first four Commandments self-serving? The first "no other God but me" The second "make no graven image" The third "not take God's name in vain" The fourth "sanctify the Sabbath day" Why do three of these carry the death penalty? Why does God in the seventh commandment consider the penalty for adultery should be death? Why didn't the Commandments cover child abuse, human rights (torture!), slavery etc?

Was there enough room on Noah's Ark for Noah's family (8) and at least two of every animal and seven of some? Where were all the food supplies stored? Note: according to the Bible, the flood lasted a year!

The Exodus church treats the Bible metaphysically, allowing people to think for themselves.

Is God, who commanded the extermination of the Amalakites and Canaanites "*now go, attack the Amelkites.....Do not spare them ; put to death men and women, children and infants.....*" (1 Samuel 15:2-3) guilty of ethnic cleansing?

The church seems to have given up talking about Hell and the Devil. Was that a conscious decision? When? Isn't the existence of Hell a serious ethical problem? Surely, a cruel place like Hell is inconsistent with the concept of a moral, just and benevolent God ?

Heaven is “with God”, Hell is “without God” – not a place or a physical state. “... *He descended into hell.*” How can God be without God?

c.f. “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

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I leave you with yet another of my favourite quotations, which I didn't use in my Easter piece on “Truth”, this time from Victor Hugo's '*Les Contemplations*'

"Dieu bénit l'homme non pour avoir trouvé, mais pour avoir cherché."

- *"God blesses man, not for having found, but for having searched."*

So *please*, add to the list by logging on to howardbrayton@gmail.com and ask those on your address book if they would like to do the same.

...and finally, in our Bishop John Pritchard's wonderful new book*, (which should be made compulsory reading for all of us), he says, “... *we bring disturbing questions that go beyond trite conventional answers.*” - *page 128*

“The truth ... is that for many people of faith, God has gone absent without leave, spiritual disciples are wearying, prayer seems like talking to oneself, and to all intents and purposes, they are living without God. And to make matters worse, they probably haven't told anyone about it and it's lonely” but **that's** on the first page!

* “*God Lost and Found*” John Pritchard SPCK 2011

Howard Brayton

June 2011

Latest update 23rd November 2011

“Christianity or Churchianity”

The Published Work

“No Holds Barred”

The audience: is the ordinary person, with a spiritual yearning, with questions half formulated, with no answers, whom the church (churches) has (have) let down, left un-fulfilled, or indeed alienated.

The format: needs to be serious in content but light in accessibility; Regroup the questions and divide the content into self-contained sections, so that the book is not intended to be “read” in any sequence, but can be used variously as a self-help; for group discussions; or sermon suggestions. Use lists, bullet points, cartoons, quotations, pictures, anecdotes ... appendices - e.g. dates or time-lines, lists of early Fathers and theologians, notes on other religions, internet sites, etc. etc. ; possibly diagrams which could be blown up and used as OHP slides or for Power-point presentations.

An Introduction, but not called that, because often Introductions have Roman numbered pages and are skipped over; maybe something like “**This Book is for You**” or “**What’s It All About?**” explaining that very many people have more questions than answers; that the reader is not alone. That in the end there *are* no answers which fit everyone’s perspective; encourage readers to think for themselves and not to be brow-beaten by institutional dogma.

Unpack the meaning of *religion* (institutional – church) *belief* (personal), *opinion*, *conviction* ... and *faith* (hope, trust)

Acknowledge the problems; put them in historical perspective; what is the relevance or otherwise for today?

Following the Reformation, *“It was a faith that only demanded attendance, and then left parishioners to think Christianly what they liked. This comfortable ambiguity was both its strength and its weakness, as indeed it is to this day.”*

(Roy Strong; *A Little History of the English Country Church* Vintage 20080

Each section to have an explanation of where it's coming from; the questions people have asked; some historical background; some idea of others' thoughts; some suggested reading - but only of a couple of books whose content is readily accessible - or maybe graded according to difficulty!

Epilogue: Keep searching / keep asking the questions; Further study; finding like-minded people; ways forward: join / start a group; find a responsive understanding person / priest / church ...

The publishing:

The title: Bp John Oxon suggested something like, **“No Holds Barred”**
- I like it

It needs to be such that it reaches the target audience, through modern eye-catching, colourful cover, and lots of “dynamic white space” on the pages.

Howard Brayton