

# RELIGIONS IN COLLISION

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Back in the 1930s the New Yorker magazine published a cartoon of two middle-aged women sitting on a porch swing. Off to one side a boy and a girl were whispering to one other. One lady turns to the other and says, “Oh look, they’re talking about sex; isn’t that cute.”

I wonder if the greater church and the rest of the world will say the same thing about the bishops assembled for the Lambeth Conference when the Archbishop of Canterbury has them all spend a day talking about sex.

All too many still fail to realize that the issues confronting the Anglican Communion are not about sex but about God. William Oddie made the point some years ago in his book, *Whatever Happened to God?* In more recent times several have observed that two diametrically opposed religions, each with its own inherent theology, are running rampant among those who consider themselves devout Christians. Yet because our attention has shifted from theology to biology we have failed to make any serious attempt to understand the basic presuppositions of either of these religions or of even grasping the nature of the conflict between them.

What then divides us? Some believe that the fault line lies in the division between liberal and conservative; others that we suffer from a division between revisionist and traditionalist, and a few still think that the fault lies between different schools of churchmanship. But if these alone were causing our divisions, reconciliation could be found through dialogue, as some of our leaders still hope. The division between us has proven impossible to resolve because we are at odds over the very nature of the God we worship. It used to be said that we all worshipped the same God though in different ways, yet the truth of the matter is that we are worshipping

different gods but in the same rather indifferent sort of way. We and the churches to which we belong are victims of a modern religious war.

We are fighting a war between what I shall call classical Christianity rooted in the religion of Abraham, and a religion once embraced by ancient pagans but now, often unwittingly, upheld by some of the most committed members and leaders of our churches. This was dramatically brought home to me after reading a recent booklet by Thomas Woodward, an Episcopal priest, called *Undermining the Episcopal Church*. The booklet's very title precludes by its accusatory character any possibility of dialogue or reconciliation. Instead it is a declaration of open warfare against those in our churches who think they are upholding classical Christianity. Unlike so many, Thomas Woodward recognizes a war when he sees one and calls upon the adherents of his new religion to fight its enemies to the death.

What then are the underlying beliefs about the God of this new religion and how are they different from those of classical Christianity? To get some idea we need no look no further than Woodward's booklet.

1. Woodward agrees that what separates Christians from one another these days "is not all about sex and human sexuality." But neither does he say that it is about the nature of God. Instead he claims that we differ in "our understanding of the sacramental nature of all of life", But for him God and "the nature of all of life" seem to be almost the same thing; life being simply the outward and visible sign of God's inward presence in the world. The adherents of Woodward's new religion assume that the world is in some sense divine or at least contains the divine; it is the home or abode of the Holy Spirit, a sacrament of the presence of God within it. This is also the common belief of the secular world which talks not about the Holy Spirit but about the spirit of the times, something the church must keep up with by being subservient to the culture in which it finds itself.

Woodward talks about a sacramental world "alive with the continual sacramental presence of divine love, healing and reconciling." For him all life is sacramental and

love is “the most precious of all forces alive in the universe.” When he says that God is love he also means that all love is God: “whenever love enters this world, God enters.” Along with this divine love is also a divine power flowing through our bodies. In the laying on of hands, for example, healing comes through “the sacramental presence of Jesus Christ in the hands of the one praying which is flowing through the healer...”

Classical Christianity also believes that we live in a sacramental world symbolic of various divine attributes or characteristics, but this world is not an outward sign of God’s continual presence within it. Sacraments are specific rites given to us by God in Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the holy church. We do not make the sacraments. Nor do we bless what has already been blessed as Woodward asserts. When we bless something or someone or celebrate the sacraments we are not simply approving what God has already done, but calling down God’s blessing. In the sacrament of unction, for example, we have not simply ritualized the healing power of Jesus Christ as Woodward claims. God alone makes the sacrament of unction along with the other sacraments. Our task is to obey a God who is not part of this world but comes into the world from outside and beyond this world. Our allegiance transcends this world and stands in judgment of it. God minus the world equals God, but the world minus God equals nothing.

2. In the new religion God is constantly changing. He is in process, developing into something new in every age and so the church’s beliefs and practices must constantly change in order to keep up with this ever changing God. The church must be forever busy developing new ways of thought and new moral codes. According to Woodward, the church has been constantly changing its beliefs and practices throughout all of history. We must not look to the past: “The ‘good old days’”, as Woodward asserts, “were not good for anyone...” The 1662 Prayer Book may have been fine for the 17th century but we can only wonder at it now and at “the theology that undergirds it *at this time of our lives.*” [Italics mine] And when the Forth Gospel quotes Jesus as saying that He is the way, the truth, and the life,

this may have been alright in the early days when the church was trying to establish itself, but it doesn't make any sense today.

The classical Christian does not believe that the church changes its beliefs and practices to keep up with the times, though she does modify them as her understanding of their meaning and significance develops. The classical Christian believes that God is pure being. He is He who is, and only changes to remain the same. Because God remains the same He can make all things new; He renews His creation. It does not renew Him. The heart of belief is found in contemplation rather than originality or even social action; practice is centered in worship and from there it flows out into social action and moral behavior. So it is with the church's faith. Though it changes it remains the same. Just as the whole flower is contained in the original bulb but only gradually becomes visible, so hidden aspects of the faith gradually become clear. Our understanding of the Christian faith grows and develops; the implicit becomes explicit. Yet it remains the same faith that was held by the first apostles. The new does not contradict the old. Woodward does not seem to understand this. He makes fun of those who talk about the "faith once for all delivered to the saints." Because different saints emphasized different aspects of the faith at different times, he fails to realize that there is only one faith with many complimentary aspects and that the classical Christian desires to embrace them all.

3. Because the new religionist's God is constantly changing into something other than itself, so truth itself keeps changing. The latest idea or fad is always the best. We discover the truth through our unique individual experience so that what may be true for you need not be true for me. Opinion becomes substituted for truth and propaganda takes the place of facts. This is undoubtedly why Woodward plays so fast and loose with his facts. He suggests for example that conservatives in his church are trying to change it, whereas it is common knowledge that they are trying to leave it. He says that we should accept the authority of the whole bible, and then goes on to say that St. Paul is not part of that bible and, as we have seen, argues that St. John is now irrelevant. He even has the audacity to say that so-called

conservatives are throwing away centuries of biblical scholarship. As for the present controversies within his church he claims, contrary to well known facts, that all Episcopal church property has always been held in trust for the national church since its founding.

Classical Christians believe that we cannot fool around with the facts. Truth is something given; it never changes into something else. What is true now is true forever, and what is true for one is true for all. But as it is with the faith, so truth in itself does not change even though our understanding of the truth grows and develops. Different people in different cultures and at different times grasp different complimentary aspects of the same truth. But still there is only one truth.

4. The new religionist abhors differences. He believes that God is trying to smooth Himself out. He is a monist though he doesn't know it, because he doesn't spend all that much time thinking about the nature of God. For Woodward God is simply love. With no talk of the Trinity he assumes that God is a unit, an integer. Though he would probably call himself a Trinitarian he is a spiritual Unitarian. He talks about Anglican diversity but sociologically and spiritually he is a Conformist who wants to include everyone in everything, just so long as everyone believes and acts the way he does. There is no difference between laity, bishops and archbishops, nor are there any differences between people of different churches. Baptism is the rite which proclaims that we are all the same and everyone should have an equal say in the life of the church no matter what their training or office might be. For a vibrant democracy he has substituted a facile egalitarianism. Woodward rightly says: "When we break our ordination or consecration vows, we undermine the credibility of the Christian Church, the Body of Christ we were ordained or consecrated to serve", but then goes on to identify our service to that Church with our allegiance to his own specific denomination: the Episcopal Church, and chastises fellow Anglicans for "invading our own church in the United States", seeming not to care that the Episcopal Church has many parishes and even a pro-cathedral established in the Church of England's Diocese of Europe.

The new religionist embraces all people by treating everyone, ethnically and racially and morally, as though they were all like him, and casts out those who dare to be different, such as classical Christians. Psychologically he has no trouble empathizing with those living in homosexual relationships because he has a mentality which finds unity of opposites very problematic at best. He denigrates those who disagree with him by exaggeration. Woodward falsely argues that the traditionalist “distrusts ambiguity, doubt, mystery, and the presence of the Holy in human experience,” and falsely suggests that the traditionalist and the Roman Catholic Church believe that in a Christian marriage a couple must be fertile and have all their sexual equipment “in full working order.” Quite contrary to the facts he even claims that St. Paul and the Lambeth Conference maintain that there is “no place in heaven” for thousands of people like Michelangelo and Sir John Gielgud. Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden who asked, “Is it true that you cannot eat from any of the trees in the garden?” he tries to turn men and women against the God of classical Christianity by exaggerating His demands.

The classical Christian on the other hand relishes differences, though not contradictories. He finds infinite variety within God and believes he is the creator of the world’s differences. He is a monotheist; he believes that God is not a unit but a unity; not an integer but integrated. God does not simply love the world which He made. He is love because He is a Trinitarian community of Persons, He is not a Unitarian individualist in love with Himself; he does not have a narcissus complex. His unity comes from sacrificial love, not from the pursuit of self-fulfillment. Whereas the new religionist tries to find unity in mutual feelings, in emotional bonds of affection, the classical Christian believes that unity comes from a sacrificial love that gives itself away, neither counting the cost nor demanding any return.

5. While the classical Christian believes that God is a personal community united by sacrificial love, the new religionist acts as though God is a collection of forces competing for power. For the classical Christian God is pure reason. He is rational

in being and in behavior. He is faithful and ethical. God and the persons He has created are not puzzles or problems to be solved but mysteries to be loved. But though God is a mystery, we still know who He is, even though we will never plumb the depths of that knowledge.

God is rational in time. History is important and it makes sense. But Woodward treats history as an irrational process of progressive change. Instead of history he believes in myth; opinion replaces knowledge and the past becomes whatever he wants it to be. The new religionist also acts as though God is known through individual feeling and experience. God is an impersonal force who acts on whim. Our lives are governed by luck and by fate. There is no rhyme nor reason to what happens to us. Instead of there being an ethical purpose to our lives, we are bound up in the chaos of contemporary mores, taboos, and current fashion.

6. The classical Christian believes that God is orderly. We know Him ultimately through scripture as interpreted by tradition rather than by opinion, and understood through reason rather than individual experience. God reveals Himself through the prophets and other sacred writings, and ultimately in the words and actions of the God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Woodward however does not believe in the final authority of Jesus' words, claiming without evidence that "for Episcopalians and most Anglicans, revelation has not been propositional; that is, it is not a set of precepts and rules." He lumps scripture, tradition and reason all together, but with none of them having any final authority. All are interpreted by one's own experience and opinions. He asserts that we should accept the bible as a whole but then goes on to call some writings of St. John irrelevant and to deny that St. Paul's writings are part of the bible - all because they do not all fit in with Woodward's own opinions. Abandoning the principle of classical Christianity that all of the bible should be interpreted in such a way that no one part can contradict another, Woodward, like many other new religionists, sees the bible as an individualistic collection of sayings, teachings and beliefs which are mutually exclusive of one another. And along with parts of the bible, all rules

and codes goes out the window. So what happens to the Ten Commandments, catechisms, rules of moral conduct and the precepts of the church? Nothing is left except the constitution and canons of his particular denomination.

In the days of ancient Rome the differences between the two religions, classical Christianity and what I have called the new religion, were quite obvious. Those who called themselves Christian believed in one kind of God; while rest of the citizenry believed in another. The pagan could recognize the fundamental elements of his own religion whether it was being practiced by the followers of Mythras or Diana of the Ephesians. Christianity however, was so very different that the ancient citizen found the early Christians a frightening and imponderable mystery. The Christians could recognize the pagan gods but thought they were demons in disguise. Christian and pagan alike all named their gods. By baptism everyone knew which side of the fault line they were on.

Today this task is much more difficult. The lines have become blurred; people say one thing and practice the opposite, without even realizing it. Many who do not profess Christianity live by Christian beliefs while others who believe they are Christian live just the opposite. Christians today, no matter what they outwardly profess, are divided over what kind of God or gods they really worship - the God of the early Jews and Christians or the gods of the ancient pagans that now go nameless. Only by looking at the characteristics of our respective gods can we tell what side of the fault line each of us is really on. We must then make a decision; we cannot remain on both sides at once. Christians hold complimentaries together, but not contradictories; they say "both/and" whenever possible, as the Anglican tradition has always tried to do. But, as we said at the beginning, classical Christianity and the new religion are not complimentaries but contradictories. We cannot hold them both together without becoming spiritually schizophrenic. We must choose between them, and we must choose now.