

# BEING AUTHENTICALLY CHRISTIAN

## Introduction

Charles Taylor has defined authenticity as the contemporary ideal; a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, a standard of what we ought to desire.<sup>1</sup> Authenticity is not neutrality. It takes a definite position about what constitutes the good life.<sup>2</sup> It is not subjective, something different for each of us. It presupposes commonly-held standards.<sup>3</sup> It is not relative.<sup>4</sup> The ideal of authenticity has a moral force associated with it - a standard that can be held to be valid as a measuring stick of behaviour. It presupposes three things: that authenticity is a valid ideal; that one can argue in reason not only about the ideal but about what constitutes conformity to it; and that such arguments matter.<sup>5</sup>

The reason that I have chosen authenticity as the paradigm for this paper is my concern for a malaise that I perceive pervading modern Christianity; particularly in my own tradition – Anglicanism – but not by any means limited to it. We are currently living in a time when much that had been firm is changing; not only the liturgy, but also the nature and composition of the priesthood, the role of the laity, the role of the church in engaging (or not) its surrounding community, and even the basic tenets of the faith. We do not agree on whether or not God exists, or whether our faith is merely a form of philosophy; or whether there was a historical Jesus, and if so, whether we believe he did what our Scriptures say he did. For that matter we don't agree that our Scriptures are valid descriptions of what happened, or simply express a particular moral philosophy in the form of a story. We do not necessarily agree on very much at all about the faith we commonly espouse. Instead, our

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, (Toronto: House of Anansi press Inc., 2003), 16.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 23.

Christianity is a la carte. My meal may be very different from yours. I may not accept the validity of Leviticus, John, Romans and Corinthians. You may prefer John to the synoptic gospels, and except for the psalms, disregard the whole of the Old Testament as no longer being relevant. What's more, the whole construct can be subtly, or not so subtly, altered by layering on the lens of political correctness – absolute relativity.

The central theme of our study in this course has been what is it to be truly human? Each author presented discussed this question from his own particular perspective; yet overall, at the end of the course, we have come to the conclusion that they all agree. The completely human is the religious. One cannot be fully human alone; but only in intimate relation with the divine, and with the divine in intimate relation with us. In other words, the authentically human is the authentically religious.

The purpose of this paper is to examine that authenticity, through the lens of Holy Week – the most meaningful time in our liturgical year – to form some conclusions about what it is to be authentically Christian.

### **Palm Sunday**

Palm Sunday observes the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as the long awaited messiah. He is enthusiastically welcomed as the Davidic king (Mk 11:10), by enthusiastic crowds waving palm branches, and spreading their coats on the road in his path (Mt 21:1-9, Mr 11:1-10, Lk 19:28-38). He is even hailed as king (Lk 19:38). These are the same crowds who will five days later cry for his execution.

Jesus did enter Jerusalem as a king. To ride on mule or an ass was an emblem of peace. Kings and princes commonly rode on them in times of peace, and it is mentioned as a mark of rank and dignity to ride in that manner, (Jdg 10:4; Jdg 12:14; 1Sa 25:20). Solomon, himself, when he was inaugurated as king, rode on a “mule,” (1Ki 1:33). Riding in this manner, denoted neither poverty nor degradation, but was the appropriate way for

the King of Zion to enter into his capital.<sup>6</sup>He did not represent himself as other than he was; and there is no evidence to say that he agitated the crowd, or caused it to be gathered in any way. Of course he knew what was to happen, because of who he was.

Noam Chomsky, in *Necessary Illusions*, has depicted the United States manufacturing consent at home, deceiving the masses with 'necessary illusions'<sup>7</sup> - myth, lies, denials, spin and 'interpretation' of events - to achieve particular objectives. It is what governments and elites do to maintain power. Indeed, he argues that governments have often used forceful intervention, to curb dissent, and suppress challenges to private power, when implicit controls do not suffice.<sup>8</sup> He provides several examples: Woodrow Wilson's Red Scare demolished unions and other dissident elements; and his Creel Commission created war fever among the generally pacifist population, facilitating the entry of the United States into the First World War.<sup>9</sup> The combination of propaganda, coupled with the support of intellectuals who devoted themselves to 'historical engineering', proved to be a potent mix.

In like manner, the Pharisees and Sadducees may have manufactured the Palm Sunday event, or at least furthered it in some way, to create a situation where Jesus would be perceived as a threat by the civil authority. Certainly they had incentive to do so, and were looking for an opportunity. In any event, they were able to take advantage of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as a substantial part of the evidence that condemned him before Pilate.

Jesus, of course, participated in this illusion of incipient rebellion because he knew it was a means to the end. If he was to become the

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<sup>6</sup> This information was gleaned from *Albert Barnes Notes on the Bible*, included with the e-Sword Bible Software (<http://www.e-Sword.com>)

<sup>7</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 2003), 19.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Chomsky, 29

saviour of the world by dying for our sins, the Roman authorities had to be persuaded to crucify him.

### **Maundy Thursday**

Maundy Thursday is packed with events: The Last Supper, Jesus' washing of the Disciples feet, the institution of the Eucharist, the betrayal by Judas, and the "new" commandment – the love commandment (Jn 13:34-35) and Jesus' struggle to surrender to the will of His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In the events of the upper room we are given a paradigm of two kinds of ministry: The Eucharistic ministry which Jesus established by saying words of institution over the bread and the cup, and sharing his body and blood with his friends; and the diaconal or servant ministry that he demonstrated by washing his disciple's feet; and inviting them to do the same for each other in love. The first provided the model for ordained ministry; the second, the priesthood of all believers, in which we were commanded to serve one another in the most humble of ways. In both, we were commanded to 'do this in memory of me" until his coming again.

Northrop Frye has said that the fundamental job of the imagination in ordinary life is to produce out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in.<sup>10</sup> Since we cannot live in a state of separation indefinitely, we have to learn how to relate the two. The society we live in produces a social mythology, the purpose of which is to persuade us to accept society's standards and values – to adjust. It's a necessary part of social coherence. It is the job of our imaginations to protect is from falling into the illusions that society threatens us with.<sup>11</sup> The essential thing, for Frye, is the exercise of our power of choice.<sup>12</sup> He points out that we live in both a social and a cultural environment. The

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<sup>10</sup> Northrop Frye, The Educated Imagination, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1993), 86

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 87

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 91.

latter is the realm of our vision; and is the one that provides the standards and values we need if we are to do more than adjust.<sup>13</sup>

For the Christian, the religious environment is our cultural one. The vision established there is of a society with standards and values based on forgiveness, salvation and love for all. Daily we must choose between the social and the cultural environments of our lives. To the extent we choose the latter, as Frye has remarked, we are taking the side of genuine and permanent human civilization;<sup>14</sup> becoming what we most truly are.

An understanding of the commonality of our cultural environment is formed through dialogue with others. The standards and values of our cultural environment – our Christian heritage – are informed by Charles Taylor's concept of horizons of significance.

Taylor believes that when we come to define ourselves have to take as background some sense of what is significant.<sup>15</sup> Defining myself means finding what is significant in my differences from others.<sup>16</sup> In order to make sense of this information I need to compare it to some standard, which Taylor refers to as a horizon of significance.<sup>17</sup> He notes that authenticity cannot be defended in ways that collapse horizons of significance.<sup>18</sup> Authenticity is grounded on the understanding that independent of my will there is something noble, courageous and hence significant giving shape to my own life.<sup>19</sup> I can only achieve it when we realize that something is beyond my own determination, connected to a wider whole.<sup>20</sup>

In the Christian context, the horizon of significance is the infinite reality of existence in the context of the Father and the human spirit.

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<sup>13</sup> Frye, 96.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 91.

Jesus encountered that horizon in the Garden of Gethsemane, and surrendered to it. We are asked to do the same, and live our lives in obedience to it also,

In defining our horizon of significance, we need to define what is evil and what is truth in the context of our common good. For John Ralston Saul, evil is corporatism; which causes us to deny individual responsibility for our role as citizens. The result is our adoration of self-interest and a denial of the public good.<sup>21</sup> Truth is accepting responsibility as citizens and participating in the processes of society.

For Jean Vanier, evil is loneliness; the feeling of being unwanted, unloved and unloveable. Loneliness is a taste of death.<sup>22</sup> Healing flows from belonging and inclusion; and begins in relationships.<sup>23</sup> The test of authentic Christianity lies at the heart of the gospel – to love one’s enemy. (Lk 6:27-28)<sup>24</sup>

For Gregory Baum, evil is oppression.<sup>25</sup> Salvation flows from liberation, and the reconstruction of society.<sup>26</sup> The test of authenticity is viewing the world from the standpoint of the poor and the oppressed.<sup>27</sup>

Ronald Wright’s concept of evil is an unthinking and unremitting pursuit of progress that threatens to cause the collapse of our civilization by exhausting our natural capital.<sup>28</sup> Salvation lies in the transition from short-term to long-term thinking.<sup>29</sup>

### **Good Friday**

Good Friday commemorates Jesus’ arrest, his trial, crucifixion and suffering, death and burial. His abandonment by His disciples; the

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<sup>21</sup> John Ralston Saul, The Unconscious Civilization, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Vanier, Becoming Human, (Toronto: The House of Anansi Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Baum, Compassion and Solidarity: The Church for Others, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1987), 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Wright, A Short History of Progress, (Toronto: House of Anansi Ltd., 2004), 124-125.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 131.

mockery, the crowning with thorns, the beating and the way of the cross move us into silence and humility. Jesus is alone, abandoned, going through His passion without support from anyone except His Father.

Through the Good Friday liturgy we are with Jesus in death. We stand at the foot of the cross, with Mary, and witness His agony and His passing.

What evokes the crucifixion in the theology of Baum is the radical commitment to view the world from the standpoint of the poor and the oppressed.<sup>30</sup> We are called to identify with victims of injustice and by supporting them in their struggle to transform society.<sup>31</sup> For Baum, the cross is the status quo, which perpetuates class conflicts over wealth, power and prestige.<sup>32</sup> For Vanier, the cross is apathy and depression; the extreme of loneliness where we find those who have lost the sense of meaning in their lives. Such loneliness is born in the most complete and utter depression where there is only emptiness, anguish and inner agitation; perhaps even a desire for death.<sup>33</sup> For Taylor, it is egoistic narcissism that results in atomism and separates the individual from authentic relationships with one another and the creator.<sup>34</sup>

### **Holy Saturday**

On Holy Saturday, we contemplate Jesus in the tomb, dead. Death is the one ultimate reality we will all face. It is our ultimate fear. The reflection on this day will lead us to the Great Vigil of Easter; which begins in darkness, continues with the lighting of the first fire; and the sharing of that light acknowledging that Christ is the light of this night. The ensuing vigil of waiting, Scripture reading and prayer prepares us to celebrate God's revelation.

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<sup>30</sup> Baum, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

<sup>33</sup> Vanier, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, 55

## Easter

Jesus is alive! He is Risen! The Easter message of our traditional theology is one of renewed hope through the atonement of our sins by the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. The proof of our justification and salvation is the fact of his resurrection. Do we see the spirit of Easter in our Massey Lecture authors?

For Baum, love of neighbour calls for social justice, a transformation of society that will deliver the victims from their crushing burdens.<sup>35</sup> It is, however, as yet unrealized. Progress is being made but there is much more to be done. Yet there is progress being made, and in that there is hope. As Baum says, “The new movement linking faith and justice will not dwindle away: It will become stronger. And as society becomes harsher, it will thrive on the challenge.”<sup>36</sup>

Like Baum, Wright’s is not a realized soteriology. There is hope, a glimmer of hope since we have the tools and the means to share resources, clean up pollution, dispense basic health care and birth control and set sustainable economic limits.<sup>37</sup> However, there is an eschatological element in his outlook in that we are now standing at the point when the Easter Islanders could have still saved their society. It is, however, our last chance to get it right.<sup>38</sup>

For Saul, salvation lies in a balanced equilibrium which we have not yet realized.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, he has only seen one example of it, in the retirement home of a great Confucian teacher in South Korea, but can that one isolated example be translated into human community?<sup>40</sup> We have the tools – common sense, creativity, ethics, intuition, memory and

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<sup>35</sup> Baum, 55

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 106

<sup>37</sup> Wright, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Saul, 192.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



reason which can be applied together in some sort of equilibrium as the filters of public action; but we are not yet there.<sup>41</sup>

Taylor believes we are still caught in a complex, many-levelled struggle; involving intellectual, spiritual and political factors.<sup>42</sup> In order to address this effectively we must first overcome fragmentation and powerlessness. While we know the solution, there is yet some way to go.<sup>43</sup>

For Vanier, salvation lies in reconciliation between oppressed and oppressor which begins with forgiving ourselves, and then loving and forgiving our enemies.<sup>44</sup> He roots this aspect of his theology in Jesus invitation to love our enemies; which we cannot do by ourselves, but can through his the inner power of the spirit which will; transform our hearts.<sup>45</sup> Our hope is that if we work at it, God works in us; and one day our resentments will disappear.<sup>46</sup>

Paradoxically, perhaps the most hopeful in the Easter tradition is Northrop Frye, who makes room for God's radical, transforming imagination; provided that we take time to listen in leisure, and stoop down low enough to listen.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

What can we say about being authentically human, and therefore authentically religious and Christian in light of Massey Lecture Authors we have studied?

1. We must daily exercise our power of choice to choose between the social and the cultural environments of our lives. (Frye)
2. In order to make meaning, we need to compare our actions, to some standard, which Taylor refers to as a horizon of significance.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 194.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor, 120.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Vanier, 158.159.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>47</sup> Frye, 98.

3. We must accept responsibility as citizens, and participate in the processes of society. (Saul)
4. We must seek relationship; with God and with our neighbour, and practice the love commandment. (Vanier)
5. We must transform our thinking from short-term to long-term thinking.<sup>48</sup> (Wright)

We must also realize that these measures are intended to inform and enhance, not replace, our basic tenets of salvation; which are based on our justification through out Lord Jesus Christ, in whom lies our salvation.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 131.

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