

Wednesday June 20, 2012

The cultural filters that shape our religions

By Jim Taylor

Having spent my first ten years in India, I'm attracted to some elements of Hinduism. I like the ideals in the Upanishads. And I appreciate Hinduism's definition of the nature of God -- "tat tvam asi," whatever one can imagine, "that thou art."

The trouble with Hinduism, from my perspective, is that it is so... well, so Indian. All those Sanskrit terms, food I love but that doesn't always love me, chants that sound so, well, so foreign...

I'm also impressed by some elements of the Baha'i faith -- their gender-equality, their tolerance of other traditions... But much of it feels so, well, Persian. So foreign...

I am, of course, Christian. At least, I claim to be Christian -- although some on the more conservative end of the Christian spectrum might challenge my claim. I used to think that Christianity had no particular cultural ties, that it was universal.

After his first evangelistic crusade to Russia, Billy Graham admitted ruefully that he had equated the Christian Way of Life with the American Way of Life.

I am slowly recognizing that Christianity -- at least, the Christianity that I grew up with -- is also a cultural expression.

Prisoners of the printed word

It's not Jewish, even though it has its origins in Judaism and still claims Jewish scriptures as part of its Holy Book.

But Christianity lost most of its Jewish roots when Paul brought the story of the risen Jesus to Philippi at the head of the fabled Aegean Sea. He re-shaped the story of a Jewish Messiah into Greek thought patterns. He appealed to reason, as Aristotle might have.

The religion that spread north and west, and eventually headquartered itself in Rome, would soon feel as foreign to Jews as Hinduism feels to me.

As Europe became the industrial heartland of the globe, Christianity became even more a prisoner of its culture. Especially since Gutenberg printed the Bible. To this day, when our preachers expound the word of God, they think of the *printed* word of God.

Evangelical preachers typically hold a Bible while they preach. Liberal preachers may not actually clutch the Bible, but they will inevitably refer to it, quote from it, build their message around it.

Western Christianity has become co-dependent on the printed word.

A distorted perspective

I heard about a church that used a "red-letter Bible" -- with the words that Jesus supposedly said printed in red. As a reader stood to read the gospel passage, the sun shining through the church's stained glass windows cast a beam of red light onto the lectern. Jesus' words disappeared.

What would we do if we didn't have the printed text to rely on?

Print automatically sets up its own set of perceptions. It is orderly. It is sequential. It is abstract. It is rational.

But none of those qualities define religious experience. Religious experience can be, and often is, chaotic, undisciplined, jumbled, and immediate.

Marshall McLuhan contrasted figure and ground. We focus on the figure, he said, but fail to see how the (back)ground influences our perceptions of that figure. For western churches, print is the invisible ground that shapes “the word.” We see our faith through the filter of a technology.

Little wonder that our missionaries promoted literacy.

To many other cultures, the rational faith I have known all my life in must seem very, well, foreign.

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YOUR TURN

Last week I used the metaphor of canned goods that no longer have a visible “best-before” date to explore the possibilities that some ideas, and some ideologies, may also have passed their best-before date.

“That's what makes life interesting and challenging,” Cliff Boldt agreed. “Sometimes those rusty cans have a bulge; sometimes they don't.”

Nancy Harms entered into the conundrum: “‘Best’ or perfect should be interpreted as 100%. How about 95% or even 75%? Is that considered passable? And, what are those dates? I'd say, that's up to the consumer, be it canned goods, history, or the like. Do we throw out our foundations because they no longer are ‘Best’? Then there would be no source to establish percent or adjective to what.

Another Nancy, Nancy Harris, forwarded an article by Howard Bess, through a Quaker congregation, which suggested that Jesus was calling his people, in his time, back to the timeless injunctions of Moses for a jubilee economy.

Nancy noted, “Howard Bess' assertion is that Jesus claimed -- or reclaimed -- the validity of Torah economy even though Torah was then at least 600 years old.

“Now 2100 years older, the Torah, in Jesus' understanding of its economic relationship of rich to poor and their stewardship to what is God's, seems relevant to our present concerns about ‘the 1% and the 99%.’ Interesting to me is that a process of winnowing, of separating the wheat of Torah from chaff, takes place both in Jesus' and later in Paul's (cf Romans 13) citations of Torah. It seems to me that both lift up the ethics of relating to God but don't make acceptance of the whole Torah, chaff as well as wheat, a precondition of entering God's Kingdom.

Nancy offered an intriguing measure for shelf-life: “My conclusion is that restrictive ideas tend to be time-bound and become toxic; Jesus' Torah dictum regarding Human-Human and Human-God ethics and Paul's assessment of the ethical Torah imperatives bespeak eternal shelf-life.”

Clyde Harris questioned whether best-before dates were set for the consumer's benefit: “Best-before dates are set to reduce legal problems if something goes wrong. Even bottled water has a best before date set under the Food and Drug regulations. Maybe it is time people take responsibility for their own actions if they open a rusted out can, as your friend did, or even one on which the date can still be read. It is their personal action that is being protected against. Many years everyone was responsible for themselves and their dependents, and we all survived. We certainly didn't look for a date to tell us if something was good or bad. We are too ready to shift blame.”

Charles Hill posed an intriguing question: “If I can convince you that God created what is in the can, does time count?”

Isabel Gibson must like baseball. She wrote, “Two home runs today -- conceptual cans with no best-before dates (how **will** we know, indeed?), and your Psalm paraphrase.”

My daughter Sharon corrected my memory about that psalm, by the way. She says she moved in 1989, not 1988.

Doug Linzey had a comment about the column the week before, about meeting glances: “When we moved to Toronto for a few years from Nova Scotia, I noticed that even people in our neighbourhood seemed studiously to avoid eye contact. Whenever I voiced a greeting to someone new, almost without exception the recipient would look a bit shocked, then decide maybe it wouldn't be so bad to respond. Once the ice was broken, everyone was as friendly as could be. But it took an outsider to make it happen.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Here's a psalm you won't find in my book “Everyday Psalms.” As I looked at Psalm 9:9-20 – the recommended reading for Sunday June 24 – I wasn't satisfied with what I had written. So I took another run at it. Here's what came out.

- 9 The Lord watches over the beach of life
 from the lifeguard's chair;
 we feel safe venturing into the water.
- 10 Lifeguards have taken training.
 They know how to watch out for trouble --
 for sharks in the water,
 and sharks among the sunbathers on the sands.
 They will not be distracted from their duty.
- 11 Thank God for lifeguards.
 Thank God for playground supervisors, and crossing guards,
 and counsellors who keep us from destroying ourselves.
- 12 They may have their own troubles, but they do not
 let those troubles interfere with their care for us.
- 13 O God, I am drowning!
 I've been sucked out to sea by the undertow;
 I can't help myself any more!
 Everything's turned against me;
 Help me rise from the depths of my depression,
 back to your sunlit surface.
- 14 Throw me a lifeline, so that I may tell everyone
 how you saved my life.
- 15 Sharks will turn on themselves, eventually.
 They hold all the aces, but they play their hands wrong.
 They want a windfall, so they buy Bre-X and Enron.
 Gutted their own greed, they will sink to the bottom.
- 16 This is how the Lord of the universe works.
 The Lord does not need bolts of lightning
 or colliding continents to execute judgement.

The sharks who slither among us
define about their own downfall.
17 They become a footnote to history.
18 But the poor and the weak,
the oppressed and the marginalized –
they carry on. They will not be forgotten.
Hope, like the sun, rises new every day.
19 Rise, O Hope of the world.
Do not let the sharks take over the beach.
20 Scatter them; break up their alliances and consortiums.
Let them know that order reigns over chaos.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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