

VERDICT

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The Challenge of a New Beginning

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Foreign visitors are often stunned by the strength and pervasiveness of religion in the United States. Will Herberg once concluded, that “Americans believe in religion in a way that perhaps no other people do.” Indeed, most Americans not only believe that religion is a good thing, but that it has made the nation great. National leaders frequently praise this religious heritage and regard religion as the indispensable guide to the nation’s destiny and the cohesive element in the national fabric. It would not be difficult to cite many such statements from Eisenhower to Reagan.

In contrast to these popular Presidential tributes to religion, however, are the rather shocking statements of such Presidential statesmen as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. These fathers of America appear ten feet tall as they stride across the landscape of history. Their statements are treasured and often repeated as words of wisdom. Might it not be instructive to inquire what these giants thought of religion? (And we should remember that in their day Christianity was the prevailing religion.)

Jefferson said:

I do not find in orthodox Christianity one redeeming feature. . . .The greatest enemies of Jesus [are the doctrines and creeds of the church]. It would be more pardonable to believe in no God at all than to blaspheme him by the atrocious writings of the theologians. John Calvin was a demon and a malignant spirit. 2

Furthermore, the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., immortalizes his historic oath, “I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” Jefferson included the institutions of the Christian religion in his hated forms of enslavement.

James Madison wrote:

During almost fifteen centuries the legal establishment known as Christianity has been on trial and what have been the fruits, more or less, in all places? These are the fruits: pride, indolence, ignorance and arrogance in the clergy. Ignorance, arrogance and servility in the laity, and in both clergy and laity, superstition, bigotry and persecution. 3

George Washington did not appear to have much regard for religion. He refused to take communion; and when he went to church, he refused to kneel. His adopted daughter wrote, "He communed with his God in secret" 4

John Adams became so disenchanted with the religious "baggage" of Christianity that he wrote, "Nowhere in the Gospels do we find a precept for Creeds, Confessions, Oaths, Doctrines and whole carloads of other foolish trumpery that we find Christianity encumbered with." 5

Lincoln tersely declared, "Christianity is not my religion. I could never give assent to the long complicated statements of Christian dogma." 6

It is patently obvious that the founding fathers did not share either Eisenhower's or Reagan's exalted view of religion. Furthermore, in our day a growing unease with the Christian religion is spreading throughout the ranks of Christians themselves. This is not an instance of outsiders throwing stones at the church. It is the fact that committed Christians are trying to obey St. Paul's injunction, "You need to criticize yourselves closely if you want to avoid coming under a much heavier judgment" (free translation of 1 Cor. 11:31).

In his recent epic book, *The Subversion of Christianity*, the renowned Christian scholar, Jacques Ellul, argues that Christianity itself is completely contrary to what Jesus stood for— not only "on one point but on all points." 7 At its inception, says Ellul, Christianity was an intolerable scandal. But in the development of the Christian movement, Christians have been seduced by a religion which gave them what they wanted. In this the clergy were the "highly respected social class" because they were able "to make of Christianity the very opposite of what it really is." 8 Neither the officials, nor laity of the church, want the terrifying freedom that Jesus came to offer. Rather, they want freedom from the insecurity that comes with the real responsibility of being fully human. (We can only urge our readers to read Ellul's breathtaking account of this inversion of Christianity. 9)

In light of the gospel of Jesus and of history itself we can conclude that Christianity is the Antichrist. We do not say this to indulge in superficial name-calling or sensationalism. If we look at the issue soberly, this conclusion is not only inevitable, but obvious.

In the first place, our conclusion is not a *de novo* discovery. Martin Luther reached a similar conclusion in his day. Rather than being a cheap polemic against the pope, 10 Luther's essential insight was that the greatest threat to the cause of Jesus always arises from his own people. The Danish philosopher-theologian, Soren Kierkegaard,

was a prophetic figure of the late nineteenth century who charged official Christianity with being a monstrous subversion of the New Testament gospel.

An examination of other movements in history makes it clear that the intentions of a movement's founder are most endangered by its converts rather than by its enemies. For example, pure Marxists today would readily agree that the greatest threat to Marxism comes from Marxist regimes rather than from capitalism. And some Lutherans have always recognized that Lutheran orthodoxy has been the most damaging to the message of Luther. Only the disciple is in a position to betray the master, and only the followers of a movement can seriously compromise a movement.

Gandhi could discern the tension between Jesus and Christianity more clearly than Christians. On one occasion a missionary inquired, "Mr. Gandhi, what is the greatest enemy of Christ in India today?" Without a moment's hesitation Gandhi gave the answer, "Christianity!" 11

It has become almost trite to say that our age is witnessing "the end of Christendom" 12 or the end of the Protestant era. 13 One writer observed that we either sense this end of Western civilization (including Christianity) or we do not, and no further evidence will change the situation. Perhaps this is true. If the old institutions of religion are not crumbling, they are becoming increasingly irrelevant to modern man. More importantly, the old theological and philosophical assumptions which served those institutions and supported our traditional Christian world have proved to be either fallacious or irrelevant.

The Christian movement not only erected institutional structures; it also built theological structures. They were like barbed-wire enclosures to hold both body and mind within the Church. But the viability of a closed system of theological thought is as outmoded as the closed system of Newtonian physics. So much Christian theology is out of touch with reality. It is almost amusing that Christians, with heads stuck in their Bibles, are often the last to acknowledge reality. The inexorable progress of science and of history has forced us to modify or change our positions repeatedly. However, the greatest threat to the Christian religion does not come from these secular forces but from the reality of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. We believe that an honest and thoroughgoing confrontation with this reality will lead us to question the entire edifice of organized Christian religion and its theology.

We do not say there is nothing salutary in the old system. However, so much of it must be reshaped or reversed that the simplest approach is to try to abandon everything and begin again at the foundation. We say "try" because we also know that we cannot actually detach ourselves from our historical and socio-religious context. This context, after all, gives us biases from which we can never escape. But at least let us attempt to begin at the origin of Christianity as if we knew nothing about the "baggage" of subsequent Christian theology.

Christianity began with the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. Neither Jesus' life nor teachings, nor even his death, constitutes the center of the primitive Christian witness. The starting point and center of the Christian witness is the resurrection. If there is no resurrection, then Jesus is not only a charlatan, but a monstrous fraud. Apart from his resurrection, no one would have presumed to resurrect the story of his life or to preserve his memory. Even from the disciples' perspective, the sooner they could have buried and forgotten the entire disgraceful episode, the better. Only in light of the revelation which came in the resurrection did they begin to interpret this shameful past (the cross) in a new light, their present in a new light and their future in a new light. As far as the first disciples were concerned, the resurrection made everything new. The New Testament is simply a record of how the early Christians tried to come to terms with the reality of this crucified and risen Messiah.

When we, too, begin again where they began, we will also find that the resurrection faith will turn the Christian religion upside down just as it turned the Jewish religion upside down.

Notes and References

1. Will Herberg, *Protestant—Catholic—Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, rev. ed (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1960), p. 84.
2. Quoted in William Edelen, "America's Founders Rejected Orthodox Christianity," *Free Inquiry* 5, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 8.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. See Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), p. 3.
8. Ibid., p. 154.
9. See note 7. Jacques Ellul's book, *The Subversion of Christianity*,
10. Unfortunately, some of it was cheap name-calling.
11. Quoted in J. Stephen Conn, "Gandhi Still Has Impact on People," *Augusta Chronicle*, 16 Apr. 1983.
12. See Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980).
13. See Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought from Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl F. Braaten (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967, 1968).

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