

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT CREEDS
Message from Vita Como
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I would like to start today's lesson with a story.

A mystic was back from the desert. "Tell us," the people said, "What is the Divine like?" The mystic wondered just how he could ever tell them what he had experienced in his heart while in the desert.

Can the Ultimate ever be put into words?

He finally decided that in response he would give them a formula that was so convoluted and literally impossible, so inaccurate and so inadequate that their only choice would be to do as he had done and go into the desert to experience the Divine for themselves.

However, that's not what his hearers did. Instead they seized upon his formula, turning it into a sacred text or an infallible doctrine.

They then imposed it onto others as a creed or a set of holy beliefs. They even proclaimed that it was necessary to hold it sacred, if one wants to be saved.

They began to persecute and to kill those who would not consent to this formula.

They went to enormous efforts and great costs to spread this formula to foreign lands.

Some even gave their lives for this cause.

The mystic was sad. "It might have been better," he said, "if I had said nothing!"

PERHAPS, THIS IS WHY, AS FAR AS WE KNOW, JESUS NEVER WROTE ANYTHING DOWN.

It seems to me that this story articulates the problem that modern spiritual men and women have with organized religion and, to some extent, theology.

Religion has adopted theological formulas based on two things:

1. There is an experience of the Divine, which people come to believe is both real and authentic, which makes them aware of transcendence.

This experience is life changing, seemingly unrepeatable and certainly stretching to those having the experience.

It leads to new dimensions of life and to new understandings.

All religion, along with all theology, is born in such a primary experience.

2. The second thing involved in religion and theology is, however, the compelling need to explain that experience to another. That is the moment when the experience is inevitably put into human words.

The experience and the wordy explanation are never the same.

If the experience is true, it is timeless, external and transformative!

The explanation is always time bound, time warped, time limited and finite.

Every explanation freezes the experience in the vocabulary of the explainer.

The explanation reflects the world view of the explainer, the explainer's level of knowledge and the explainer's time in history.

There is no such thing as an eternal explanation.

As time moves on, the destiny of every explanation is to become increasingly foreign to its audience, increasingly irrelevant to its time and finally to be dismissed or ignored as no longer appropriate to its world.

If people begin to identify the experience with its explanation, the experience will die when the explanation dies. This is the reality of human history.

NOW LET'S LOOK AT MODERN CHRISTIANITY.

Jesus was a first century experience in which people came to believe that they had encountered in him a transcendent reality that they called God.

The New Testament was a first century attempt to explain that experience.

There is no doubt that in the Jesus experience, lives were transformed.

People who at the time of Jesus' arrest, had forsaken him and fled in fear, somehow came back together after his death and were empowered with a new courage.

Previously fearful ones were now ready to die for the reality of an experience they could no longer deny.

Even though these people had been raised inside a strict Jewish code, their "Jesus" experience forced them to expand that code so dramatically that the singularity of the Divine was compromised and they could no longer see God apart from Jesus, nor could they see Jesus apart from God.

Their understanding of the Divine was thus modified and changed forever.

The New Testament was thus the written attempt by the followers of Jesus to capture the power of their Jesus experience in words.

Inevitably, they were the words of the first century.

Can we keep our hold on their experiences by literalizing their words today?

Of course not!!

We cannot twist our minds into first century pretzels and think of the Divine in the same way that they did.

The Divine cannot be, to a post-Galilean, post-Newtonian, post-Darwinian world, a being who lives above the sky, and who once entered the earth by causing a baby to be conceived in the womb of a virgin.

Our minds and hearts are not drawn to the picture of a miracle-worker, who possessed such supernatural power that he could expand the food supply, heal the sick, banish the demons of epilepsy and mental illnesses, and even transcend the limits of death before he returned to his heavenly home by ascending into the sky of a three-tiered Universe to a realm from where this he supposedly had originally come.

That explanation may have fit the world of the first century quite well.

Today, however, that understanding of Jesus sounds strange, foreign, dated and mythological.

Space age people cannot imagine such a heavenly being.

The explanation of the New Testament may well point to truth, but the first century words that the authors had at their disposal, can never capture the reality of that experience for all time.

Explanations no matter how ancient, revered or sacred **ALWAYS** die.

No explanation is timeless, not even the explanations contained in sacred Scriptures – of any denomination.

None can, therefore, be eternal.

By the time the 4th century arrived in Christian history, Christians began to turn their 1st century New Testament explanations into creeds that were couched in the words that reflected the common assumptions of 4th century Greek-speaking people.

That world thought in terms of dualism. By this I mean they saw a strict division between heaven and earth, between the human and the divine, between the body and the soul and event between the flesh and the spirit.

Dualistic concepts therefore permeated the language of the 4th century creeds and began to shape Christian understanding.

The word **INCARNATION**, for example, which literally means “to enter the flesh of”, became a doctrine designed to explain the way Jesus was to be understood.

Next, Jesus was transformed into being the second person of the Trinity.

The human Jesus began to fade from view and a religious system that neither Paul nor the gospels writers would have ever recognized came into being.

It was this theological system that poured anti-Semitism into the blood stream of the Christian West, producing such things as the expulsion from or the ghettoization of the Jews in every Christian nation of Europe.

That killing violence finally exploded in the horror of the Holocaust in which more than 6 MILLION people died as the victims of religion gone mad.

It was this system that also expressed itself in the Crusades of the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries that sought to kill the infidel Muslims.

These 4th century creeds also gave birth to heresy hunts, religious wars and the Inquisition.

It takes enormous energy to keep dying explanations viable.

By the time the 13th century arrived, we turned these dated theological explanations into liturgies and repeated them in worship.

Far more than most people recognize, the worship services of most Christian churches were born in the 13th century understandings and practices.

It that era, human life was denigrated and devalued. So Christian worship began to proclaim that we were “born in sin”, that we were “miserable offenders,” and that we were not worthy to “gather up the crumbs under the divine table.”

In the hymns, congregations began to call themselves “wretches” and “worms”.

Life became something to be escaped not something to be lived.

We proclaimed a God that was all seeking, one “to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid” and thus a divinity before whom we quaked in fear and were compelled constantly to appease and beg for mercy.

Perhaps that is why traditional worship services seem so strange, so unpleasant, so boring to spiritual seekers in the 21st Century.

That is not our understanding of life.

Can we, as contemporary Westerners, escape, or at least relativize, our explanations from the past without losing in the process the power of the experiences which caused the explanations in the first place?

That is the question that both religion and theology ask – or should ask.

To me, the clear answer is that if one literalizes any explanation of an experience, that experience becomes mortal and is doomed to die.

Truth is thus never served by static religious or theological explanations.

This means that sacred Scriptures in any denomination, cannot be taken literally unless one wants them to die.

That means that orthodoxy can never been defined in creeds or doctrines, unless one wants orthodoxy to die.

This means that liturgical forms must always be changing, they can never be set in stone unless one wants all liturgies to become irrelevant.

So religion as we now know and practice it is, in my opinion, doomed.

Once it is literalized, its destiny is only to create fundamentalists who will exact enormous energy from us in order to protect the religious formulas of the past.

We must constantly examine, grow, expand, enlarge and be open to new ways of looking at things we think we already know. If we don't – we will turn into our own special breed of Fundamentalists – as rigid, unbending and irrelevant as those traditions we often criticize.

So we must continue as students of Truth – changing each day as we are guided.

I see you doing this individually and as a spiritual community.

NAMASTE