

From The Heart About The Heart Of The Matter

A STALE AND DUSTY FAITH, OR THE DYNAMISM OF A LIVING FAITH

by Harold Wells

I suppose that to speak “from the heart” on “the heart of the matter” one must speak auto-biographically. People respond to different aspects or dimensions of the faith because of their differing concerns and experiences in life. For me in my youth (and still today) the theodicy question has always been a core concern. How can we consider life and the world to be good and meaningful, the creation of a gracious God, in view of the enormities of evil and suffering in the world? It was not my own suffering (which was minimal) that prompted this *angst*, but suffering in the previous generation of my family, through the depression, illness and early death, and the great wars. The shocking realities of the holocausts of Auschwitz and Hiroshima were also formative, and in light of them many of my contemporaries never did find their way to faith. The theodicy question at one time drove me to the edge of cynicism and despair. It was only the message of the suffering God, the *kenotic* God (self-emptying and self-limiting), who has despaired with us in the agony of Christ and has overcome evil and darkness from within, that permitted me to leap to any faith at all. “From the heart,” I have to say that, for me, it is Christ’s cry of forsakenness from the cross that establishes Christianity as divine. Thus, the cross of the risen Christ, and the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, stand firmly as “the heart of the matter”. For me, only in light of cross and resurrection, is it possible to love, worship and trust a gracious God.

This starting point eventually developed, of course, into a full blown theological stance, that was necessarily Christ-centered and trinitarian. Thus, my perception of “the heart of the matter” flowed naturally “from the heart”.

The Heart of the Matter

All the same, when I received the request to write a brief article “from the heart about the heart of the matter,” my first reaction was one of caution. Attempts to identify “the heart of Christianity” are often suspiciously reductive, as when people say: “It all boils down to this....” To speak metaphorically, the heart is not enough; Christian faith also requires a backbone.

In 1841, Ludwig Feuerbach put out a book that is now famous, *The Essence of Christianity*, one of considerable insight into the nature of religion (which influenced both Karl Marx and Karl Barth). In that volume he spoke of religious beliefs as the projection out onto the heavens of alienated human ideals and capacities. It may have placed Feuerbach outside the boundaries of Christian faith, but the book warned us, insightfully, of the danger of projecting our own current predispositions and favoured values unto eternity. Adolf von Harnack, the great historian of Christian doctrine, in his book *What is Christianity?* (English translation, 1901) pronounced that the essence of Jesus’ teaching was nothing more than “the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.” In retrospect, Harnack’s modernist liberalism now seems vulnerable to Feuerbach’s criticism. Recently Marcus Borg offered something similar in his *The Heart of Christianity*, where (despite the genuine insights of the book) Jesus and his movement, and Christianity as a whole, are boiled down to little more than an ethic and spirituality of love. “Love” is indeed at the heart of the Christian life, but Christians have no monopoly on it, and one need not be Christian to manifest it.

Efforts, then, to name the heart of the Christian faith are almost inevitably reductive of the “breadth and length and height and depth” of “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:18).

Still, in every generation new attempts must be made to distinguish between the proverbial “baby and the bath water”. With due respect to postmodernist thinkers who object to all “essentialist” discourse, I feel it is unavoidable to make distinctions between what is necessary and what is expendable. Hasn’t almost everyone discarded double predestination, the eternal damnation of non-

Christians, and the subordination of women? — all “orthodox” teachings for many Christians a century or two ago.

To speak, then, of the heart or essence of Christianity, I would need first to speak of the backbone, i.e., of those convictions without which our faith and mission would be seriously impoverished if not unrecognizable. Such a backbone would have to include many essential elements. Here are some of the things that I think we cannot do without. (a) Faith in the triune God, the mysterious, holy, eternal One who dwells beyond our finite space and time, the Ultimate Source and Creator of all things; yet utterly immersed in creation, incarnate and vulnerable in the full humanity of Jesus of Nazareth; and universally present by the Spirit. (b) The passionate love and grace-filled outreach of God to the world in Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, in his life and teaching, and in his suffering and death for us, signifying the forgiveness of sin and reconciliation. (c) The resurrection of Jesus, sign and promise of the ultimate victory of God’s reign over all sin, oppression, evil and death, and ground of our hope of eternal life; the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, converting, sanctifying, inspiring, empowering. (d) The fellowship of the church, in its life of prayer, worship and sacraments, called to a mission of good news, of liberating justice, of practical love and the building of peace, of healing and wholeness, for all people and all creatures. All of this doctrinal substance, which may be characterized as “trinitarian” in character, depends on the witness of the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments, through which we hope to hear a living revelatory Word of God.

No doubt this list of the “essentials” reflects my own biases. To some in a liberal Protestant church like The United Church of Canada, such an identification of the breadth and depth of the Christian faith will appear ponderously orthodox in what it includes, and to others irksomely liberal in what it excludes. But which of the foregoing could we dismiss without seriously truncating the richness, breadth and depth of the faith? Can a Christian church really do without any of these elements of its doctrinal and practical backbone without serious retreat in the face of an increasingly

secularized and pluralist culture? At any rate, I find no evidence that secular folk or adherents of other religions would be impressed by such a retreat.

I hasten to add: By listing all of these elements as essential to Christianity, I do not imply that anyone who does not subscribe to all of them should leave the church! Many church members will doubt at least some of these things, and find themselves in a process of seeking and journeying; nor will they all end up where I have ended up. Many of these seekers will be faithful followers of Jesus.

Moreover, it is also “essential” that the faith tradition be constantly renewed in every generation. There will be, within the freedom of faith, many differing interpretations of each of these doctrinal *loci* and practices of Christianity. Every doctrine has to be re-stated in light of contemporary knowledge and experience, in interaction with new understandings in both physical and social sciences, religious studies, biblical criticism, philosophy and literature, as well as pressing socio-economic, ecological and cultural circumstances. Theological shifts are inevitable and necessarily involve getting rid of at least some traditional ‘bath water’. On the other hand, some aspects of tradition that have been neglected or forgotten may find new life in new times and places. The dynamism of a living faith community, always listening for a fresh ‘Word from the Lord’, has been inspired in recent years to open up to the voices of women, of colonized races and peoples, of marginalized sexual-orientation minorities, of other living religions and ideologies, and, not least, to the “cry of the earth”. If certain aspects of our doctrinal spine are essential, certain contextual elements are now also essential and indispensable to the life and mission of a church which is faithful to the Christ. A merely stale and dusty faith is surely less than faithful. That is why we miss “the heart of the matter” if our message and deeds do not address the present moment: a critical moment (*a kairos*) of ecological and economic challenge, a moment of full inclusiveness, and of openness to the universal Spirit alive and present among all people in our new and smaller world.