

Can Christianity, as a world faith, be separated from Western culture?

Gerry O’Hanlon, S.J. (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, Dublin). ⁽¹⁾

Introduction:

Am glad to be here: many thanks for invitation. Happy memories of theological studies at Queen’s and Union Theological, albeit in those often unhappy and stirring times of the 1980s in Belfast. Warm and enduring friendships that have greatly enriched my life.

I suppose my time here then was an experience for me, and for those who met me, of the kind of inculturation that is a sub-text of what I have been asked to address tonight. I will speak from my Roman Catholic, Jesuit background and hope that my comments may stimulate your own reflections on the important issue of the relationship between Christianity, as a world faith, and Western culture. Let me say at the outset, *pace* a more politically correct approach, that I don’t believe Christianity as a world religion can or ought to be simply separated from Western culture. I hope in what follows to illustrate why.

Background

Let me begin with an example to illustrate the nature of the question (the problem?) we are reflecting on to-night. I give a course on Theological Anthropology in the Milltown Institute in Dublin. At one of the first sessions, after I had distributed the bibliography, John, from Nigeria, noted that ‘this seemed very Eurocentric: was I open to other cultures?’ I replied along the lines that since this was Dublin, in Europe, it was natural, a matter of inculturation, to root our discourse in a Western milieu, but one which I hoped would be open to dialogue with other perspectives, in the context of the catholicity or universality of the Church and the faith. I added that if I were studying theology in Africa I would hope for an immersion in an African approach which might be similarly open. So far, so good – at least it bought me some time!

But of course it is not as simple as that. I was happy recently to accept an invitation to review a book by Fergus Kerry on Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians. Ten theologians are treated in some depth: nine of them are from Europe, one is from Canada – and all of them, incidentally, are male! And so the uncomfortable issue implied in John’s question is the normativity and domination that are assumed to characterize Western Christianity.

Nicholas Lash notes the remarks of Karl Rahner in this context: the Church (Rahner is referring in particular to an ecclesiological monoculture then evident in the Roman Catholic Church, but the

application can be wider) has seen itself as a kind of ‘export firm, exporting to the whole world a European religion along with other elements of this supposedly superior culture and civilisation’ (p 214). Rahner is arguing for a true world-Church, a Church of all particular places, cultures, customs; a Church shaped by particular cultural memories but with no normative cultural centre. Lash draws on Scottish Episcopalian Donald MacKinnon’s ecclesial understanding of *kenosis* to critique ‘the cultivation of the status of invulnerability’ which prevents Churches from realising the subversive nature of their catholicity by seeking refuge, *inter alia*, in a monoculture.

In 1995 I was one of 223 delegates at the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) in Rome. As the decree on Our Mission and Culture notes: ‘General Congregation 34 has brought together Jesuits from the cultures of Asia, the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe, the European Community, Africa, North America, Australia and Latin America’ (1), and a lot of learning occurred in this inter-cultural context. In particular it was noted: ‘The great cultures of Asia, in spite of centuries of missionary activity, still do not regard the Christian faith as a living presence at the heart of the Asian experience. In general, it is inseparably linked with a Western culture which they distrust. Many committed Christian in Asia feel a split between their Asian cultural experience and the still-Western character of what they experience in the Church’ (5.2). And: ‘In Africa, there is a great desire to create a truly African Christianity, in which the Church and African cultures form an inseparable union. There is also a desire to free the Gospel from a colonial legacy which undervalued the quality of indigenous African cultural values, and to bring it into a more profound contact with African life’ (5.5). Historically great Jesuit missionaries like Matteo Ricci in China and Robert de Nobili in India had indeed worked hard to offer an inculturated version of Christianity – but more typical was the Irish missionary approach with its desire to share the Good News with love of St Patrick, Irish dancing and other glories of Western civilisation!

The Issue

We need some kind of discernment as to how the universality of Christianity might best relate to the particularities of a Western culture that historically has been so dominant and normative. I hope the reflection and discussion that follow may be of some help to this discernment.

Towards a discernment of the relationship between Christianity and the West

1.1 Basic Principle: Creative tension between Universality and Particularity

It seems to me that the coming of God, Jesus Christ, into humankind, into Jewish humankind of a particular time and place, is the foundational template for all talk of inculturation. For God this incarnation was a *kenosis*, an emptying, and yet in coming into what was 'not God', still we are told 'he came unto his own', and he grew 'in wisdom, stature and favour'. But 'his own did not receive him', so that we have that opening to the Gentiles already occurring within the life-time of Jesus, extending within decades into the entire Graeco-Roman world. This foundational template already points to the mutuality of universality and particularity inherent in the Incarnation and in any subsequent inculturation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: 'the Word of God becomes embedded in the heart of a culture, it is like buried seed which draws its nourishment from the earth around it and grows to maturity' (GC 34, d.4, n.3). There is always then, in the language of Richard Miller and Nigel Biggar, a certain tension between a metaphysical catholicity or universality (as creatures we are all sons and daughters of God and bound together) and a situatedness within geographical and territorial boundaries.

This tension is processed in the manner of the Paschal Mystery, in that the embedding cultures, while supplying nourishment and growth, are also influenced by the liberating power of the Gospel to 'rid themselves of their negative features and enter the freedom of God's kingdom' (GC 34, d.4, n.3). Inculturation means 'allowing the Word of God to exercise a power within the lives of people, without imposing, at the same time, alien cultural factors which would make it difficult for them truly to receive the Word' (idem). However this liberating power will also be, at times, a power of challenge and judgment, drawing attention to negative, sinful aspects of the culture – one recalls Richard Niebuhr's paradigm of Christ for culture, Christ against culture, Christ transforming culture.

1.2 Historical Process of this Basic Principle in the West

Now this process of mutuality between gospel and culture, present in and from the time of Jesus himself, was of course present in the early centuries of the Christian Church, which proclaimed its faith in ways that a Hellenistic culture could receive and was at the same time

shaped by that culture. (GC, 34, d.4, n.4). That seminal early experience, notwithstanding the rich religious culture of Eastern and Orthodox theology and the later input of Islam, was at the roots of what became a dominant European and Western culture of Christianity which developed from the Constantinian settlement, through the centralizing forces of Papacy and Charlemagne, from Augustine to the High Scholastic synthesis of Aquinas, the Reformation, the phenomenon of Modernity with its phases of Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution and its emphasis on empirical reason and subjectivity, science, democracy and human rights, and capitalism in its various forms. To what extent, if any, is this Western form of Christianity, now inclusive of course of the United States and Canada, normative for the faith world-wide?

1.3 Can Western Christianity be considered as in any way normative?

Pope Benedict XVI's controversial address at Regensburg in 2006 is helpful in provoking an answer to this key question. You may recall that some unfortunate references to pejorative comments about Islam by the 14th century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus were the occasion of the controversy. More centrally, however, Benedict was concerned to argue in favour of the value of that dialogue between faith and reason (word) which has been characteristic of Western Christianity from its earliest encounter with Hellenistic culture. If I understand him correctly, he wants to assert that the Greek philosophical (also in the tragedians?) challenge to myth, its assertion of the basic intelligibility of the world and of the correspondence between our knowing and reality, was an ideal milieu in which Christianity came to birth. God's transcendence is not something capricious or arbitrary: however mysterious, there is a basic compatibility between faith and reason, so that the Greek notion of the intelligibility of the world is an ideal seed-bed for the incubation of the Word. That acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature is not merely a Greek idea but is always and intrinsically true and is assumed in John's prologue: 'In the beginning was the Word....'

Benedict puts this strongly, perhaps too strongly at times – he can go from saying 'the encounter between the biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance' to speaking of 'the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between biblical faith and

Greek inquiry'. Still, there is much truth in his assertion that 'this inner rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history – it is an event which concern us even today'. And given this convergence, 'it is not surprising that Christianity, despite having its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically decisive character in Europe'. Benedict goes on to argue against the notion that, in the light of our experience with cultural pluralism, this synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church is 'a preliminary inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures'. Rather, he argues, 'the New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which has already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed' (cf the Wisdom literature, for example). And so, even if there are elements in the early Church that do not have to be integrated into all cultures, still 'the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself'.

2.1 Application of this basic principle to relationship between Christianity as a World Faith and Western Culture

It would be a mistake, it seems to me, if Benedict's reflections were inflated to exclude influences other than those of the Christian West in the making of Europe: of significant, if lesser influence, were both the Christian East and Islamic rationalism. Neither should his remarks be taken as simple proof that Turkey, as a kind of foreign cultural body, should not have access to the European Union.

2.2 Perennial validity of aspects of Western Christianity

But perhaps his remarks can challenge us to begin to identify what in the Western cultural contribution to Christianity remains perennially valid, what needs to be corrected, what needs to happen in terms of the relationship to other cultures for Christianity to be truly catholic/universal.

Of perennial validity, it seems to me, is this notion of the compatibility between faith and reason, that God is not irrational. Of course God remains mystery (*si comprehendis, non est Deus* – Augustine), the Trinity, for example, cannot be deduced from reason alone, and yet, in dialogue with Jews and Muslims, we are concerned to show that our belief in the Trinity

does not contradict logically our belief in God as One. Similarly, with all our knowledge, we are still a lot more ignorant than knowledgeable about our universe, about the specifics of the true, the good and the beautiful: but our seeking after truth, goodness and beauty is not simply in principle nonsensical or arbitrary, it is rooted in our nature as human beings, and is consonant, as we have seen, with the designation of the Son of God as the Word of God. What this means, *inter alia*, is that the myth of many gods is untrue and their worship idolatry. It also means that since our world is created by this one God who is true and good, then ethics is always connected with reason and with God.

This basic principle of compatibility, expressed historically in the West through the inculturated dialogue between faith and philosophy, is a real gift to the rest of the world, in this sense it is normative and universal, even if, of course, its historical articulation in other parts of the world will be different.

2.2 How Western Christianity needs correction

2.3.1: Epistemology

Still – and here we come to the more critical, internal aspects of the discernment- in the first place the Western development of Logos/Word, particularly in its Modern and Postmodern phases (albeit traces are already present in the Voluntarism of Scotus, the Occasionalism of Ockham) is gravely deficient. What has emerged epistemologically since Descartes is a restricted notion of Reason, based on a mathematical paradigm, which limits knowledge to the empirically verifiable. This means that so-called 'soft sciences' like sociology, economics and psychology have to struggle for credibility, while faith and religion, by definition transcending the empirical, are widely ruled out of court. While Postmodernity in some sense criticizes this restricted notion of Modernity and tries to open up the discussion to other voices (for example, the voices of women, the poor, non-westerners), still it does so with a characteristic scepticism which relativizes all knowledge, downgrading knowledge to personal opinion and the ostensible respect which the accolade 'cool' is meant to bestow. The result of all this is that science and technology get cut off from the deeper questions about the meaning of life (and so, for example, we find it so difficult to constructively discuss important issues of bio-ethics), while Christianity struggles to find its voice in the public square.

2.3.2 Western Christianity and Public Life

Which leads to a second fault-line in the relationship between Western culture and Christianity. There have been many extremely valuable aspects to the gradual secularization of the West which has been a growing characteristic of Modernity, often indeed inspired by Christianity (leave to Caesar...) and sometimes led by Christians. In particular, after centuries of some form of Church/State unity following the 4th century Constantinian settlement, there has been the gradual emergence of a Church-State separation, allowing for religious tolerance, and due not least to the awful experience of the Religious Wars in Europe between Catholics and Protestants. Much of this legacy of Modernity we can be profoundly grateful for, not least the emergence of a modern state characterized by constitutional democracy and governed by the rule of law, and the notion of Universal Human Rights which has grown out of this.

However all this has been undergirded by a Liberalism which, with the restricted notion of reason already alluded to, has focused excessively on notions of the individual understood after a materialistic, economic model which has undermined the asking of deeper questions. Freedom, in this Liberal and neo-Liberal tradition, is pre-dominantly 'freedom from' (restraint), not 'freedom for' (the common good). Value is placed excessively on the individual, so that 'the other' is often viewed as there simply to be used, or an obstacle, or to be competed with. Law is framed on a contractual basis to keep warring parties apart, and not seen as serving the deeper function of bringing about the common good of community and society. The prevailing ethos tends to be a social Darwinism in which the survival of the fittest occurs at the expense of the vulnerable. In fact, in those infamous words, 'there is no such thing as society': and so the Masters of the Universe, whether in Wall Street, London, Dublin or Belfast, set alight that Bonfire of Vanities, the flames of which now threaten to consume us all. Our neo-liberal economic model in the West has been excessively self-interested, has resulted in extreme inequalities in Western societies and, most of all, between the West and the rest of the world. How obscene – and how utterly opposed to the Gospel - that when, thanks to the scientific and technological gains of Modernity, we are in a position to feed all the world, so many of our sisters and brothers continue to die of hunger.

In this context, perhaps, we have something to learn from the Islamic insistence on religion as

being a total reality, which affects all aspects of life. I don't mean that we un-learn all the lessons of the Enlightenment and Wars of Religion, and return to a form of Christian integralism which puts politicians in the pockets of Bishops and ministers of religion. Nor do I mean that Islam always has the right approach, does not need some kind of analogous process of Enlightenment itself (even if, surely, we must be a little understanding, given our own centuries-old bloody past, as Muslims go through the birth-pangs of this development within their own faith?). No: what I do suggest however – in line with a growing number of secular voices from the discipline of political philosophy such as John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas)- is that it is in the best interests both of Liberals and of Christians that the religious voice is heard in the public square. Christians need to learn a certain bi-lingualism for this to happen: to be able to put arguments derived from Christian faith and conviction in ways which fellow-citizens who may be of different or no faiths can understand. I know this is the kind of language used in Catholic Social Teaching (even if we need to learn better how to communicate this): a mixture of biblical/theological reflection, but mainly what is called 'natural law' based reasoning which, in principle, is accessible to all. Secular liberals, on the other hand, need to put aside their reflex dislike and even fear of religion, and realise that left to itself the Liberal project does not have the foundational depth to sustain itself and, properly understood, can find in religion a real ally in sustaining values that it cherishes. A somewhat long quotation from a Madeleine Bunting article, tellingly entitled 'The Muscular Liberals are Marching to a Dead End', in the unfailingly secular *Guardian* newspaper (12 September, 2005), may help to illustrate what I mean:

'Here is a quick list of some of the Enlightenment legacy that we need to keep working on: the relationship of reason to emotion and faith (of all kinds, not just religious, most particularly our faith in humanity); a broader account of human nature beyond the bankrupted belief in the perfectibility of man; more meanings of freedom than the freedom to shop; a much better understanding of what individuality is (rather than the sham version we see lauded today) and its relationship to the collective. From such work, new understandings of progress could emerge'.

Perhaps we need to begin to speak of a distinction rather than a separation between Church and State. The myth of the inevitable progress of mankind, so inspirational for Modernity, has run aground in the Gulags of

Stalin and the concentration camps of Hitler. The frivolous, fragmented, deconstructive culture of Post-Modernity, with its rejection of Grand-Narratives and its preference for hedonism and the cult of celebrity, finds itself looking for a 're-enchanted world' at a time of seemingly imminent global recession and widespread insecurity. It is in this 'post-secular' Western world that Christianity now undertakes its dialogue with culture and the old models no longer suffice. We need to find ways, particularly through civil society, of influencing the body politic. Not, certainly, by wielding political power as such. Nor by repudiating all that Modernity and Postmodernity stand for: as has been indicated, there is much that is of value here, not just for the West but indeed for humankind in general. But, by forming the hearts and minds of citizens in conversation with the Gospel world-view, this dialogue can root the real values of the West more securely and challenge the excesses and wrong-turnings, some of which I have spoken of above, most particularly those real blind spots in the area of social justice and an indifference, not to mention antipathy, towards the transcendent. Similarly of course we as Christians have much to learn from the culture about us: the dialogue is mutually enriching.

2.3.3 Christianity as a World Faith

And, thirdly, this mutual enrichment intrinsic to the inculturation process applies world-wide, not just in the West – 'A similar process is going on today in many parts of the world, as representatives of indigenous cultures, the great religious traditions and critical modernity bring insights which the Church must consider as part of the dialogue between Christian experience and the diversity of other experiences. In this way the Church is recovering, in our times, the creativity shown in the early centuries and in the best of its evangelizing work' (GC, 34, D. 4, n 4). And, concomitantly, it might be added, it is beginning to realise, as Karl Rahner has predicted, its character as world faith and church.

I am reminded of the impressions of a missionary friend, John Guiney, who spent decades working in Africa, and part of whose remit was to return to Europe to raise funds. He spoke of traveling across large tracts of Germany, France, and Belgium in smoothly

running trains people by silent, serious, prosperous, busy individuals often with worried looks on their faces: he contrasted this with the happy, often joyful expressions of the poor people back in Africa for whom he was raising the money. Have we lost our way with regard to happiness in the West? Can we learn something from the rest of the world? Do we have spiritual poverty, while we see only their material poverty? And yet, what a scandal that the so-called Christian West, despite a lot of rhetoric and indeed some real action to the contrary, should be complicit in a basically imperialistic economic attitude to an impoverished developing world.

Similarly it seems at times that the wonderful Western development of subjectivity and individuality often degenerates into an individualism that is destructive. Have we something to learn from, for example, the African ideas of fellowship, even if they, arguably, need to learn how this fellowship can avoid the extremes of sectarian tribalism?

I know from first hand experience too how the Christian mystical tradition of prayer (cf Tony de Mello, Bede Griffiths, Belfast man William Johnson in Japan and many others) has been enriched by contact with Asia, with Hinduism and Buddhism.

Arguably the Islamic reverence for the transcendence of God and its insistence on the inner connection between faith and public life are helpful reminders to us in the West where a healthy secularization has often developed into a hostile secularism. Indeed it would seem that any account now of the dialogue between faith and culture must give a central role to inter-religious dialogue, and even (cf Jacques Dupuis and others) to the possibility that God's plan for humankind includes a role for religions other than Christianity, even if Christianity retains its normative and constitutive significance. And, of course, this new emphasis on inter-religious dialogue relativizes traditional ecumenism in a helpful way – we operate in a larger context now, in which, without neglecting differences, we do well to identify what we have in common and what distinguishes Christianity in general in its dialogue with other world religions.

Conclusion

There ought to be a creative tension between the universal that is Christian faith and the particular that is Western (or for that matter any other) culture. The mutual enrichment that this tension involves includes elements of acceptance and judgment or correction. In terms of ecclesiology one notes, in Max Stackhouse's terminology, the emphasis in Catholicism on hierarchy and subsidiarity in attempting to get the balance right between the universal and the particular, while in Calvinist Reformed theology the stress is on covenant and federation.

And of course, within Christendom in general, there are many other such models. At the heart of them all will be some notion of interdependence, *koinonia*, *communio*, solidarity, collegiality. Fergus Kerr has an interesting comment on the Catholic understanding of the Petrine Ministry, the Papacy, in this context. He notes that in his 1995 Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* John Paul II appealed to Christians who are not now, and perhaps never likely to be, in full communion with Rome, to help in reshaping the papal ministry in order to make it a better servant of Christian unity. Clearly, if this kind of appeal were to bear fruit, it would result in a less authoritarian (but more authoritative?) form of Petrine ministry, exercised in communion with others, an end to which many Roman Catholics would also gladly subscribe.

You here in Northern Ireland and we on the islands of Ireland and Britain are well familiar with this notion of a tension between the universal and the particular that we hope will be creative but can also be destructive. At a most basic level, as private individuals, most of us experience the interculturality involved through marriage and kinship: it can be quite a culture shock adapting to the ways of in-laws, but if successfully negotiated, it opens up our humanity to wider vistas. At the more public level our relationships on these islands have been characterized by diverse, often competing, cultural, political and religious affiliations. At their best the maxims of 'parity of esteem' and 'multiple belongings' are consistent with the viewpoint outlined above, and the wider contexts of the European Union, the United

States, ecumenical contacts within and beyond the shores of these islands, have all been helpful in midwifing the progress that has been made.

You do not need me to tell you that this progress is always a little fragile, always subject to decline if not carefully promoted. It is never easy to open oneself up to the other, to become more universal, more catholic in that sense. You must have discovered that already, I am assuming, in your journeying together as Methodists and Church of Ireland in these Exploring Groups and under the aegis of your Covenant together. And yet, not just in Northern Ireland, but world-wide, it would seem that as human beings and as Christians it is part of our identity and call, as followers of the Jew Jesus Christ who went out to the Gentiles, to be rooted in our own tradition and open to all other traditions and experiences in a way that is constructively critical.

We cannot, with Tertullian, rest easy with the rhetorical question "What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?" It will not do to take the simplistic step, redolent of self-hatred, of simply denying or denigrating every Western manifestation of Christianity. Instead we have to take on the much more demanding, but ultimately more rewarding, task of careful and prayerful discernment, as we try to untangle what in Western Christianity may be endorsed, what must be repudiated or corrected, always in dialogue with other cultures and religions. In this way we fulfill our role as ambassadors of that reconciliation which Jesus Christ brings (2Cor, 5, 16-21), breaking down 'the dividing wall of hostility' (Eph. 2, 14), at a time when religion is often seen as a threat to world peace. This is a reconciliation that will include justice, and will be costly, inviting us to a discipleship of Jesus Christ which is marked by his Paschal Mystery of Cross and Resurrection. It is precisely in the forming of our minds and hearts along these lines that a civilising influence is then brought to bear on civil society and through it on the wider political sphere. Through such small steps and signs we may hope, thanks to the ever-faithful divine promise, for the coming of God's kingdom.

- (1) The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, Dublin. Fr O'Hanlon, doctoral studies at QUB (resident at Presbyterian Chaplaincy at Queen's), Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and formerly Dean of Theology at Milltown Institute in Dublin and Provincial of Jesuits in Ireland, currently doing theological reflection at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Dublin - author of numerous articles, of the book *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (CUP, 1990) and co-author of several other books; with a particular interest in social theology.