

## ESSENCE – IDENTITY – LIBERATION: THREE WAYS OF LOOKING AT CHRISTIANITY\*

*John May*

It is becoming increasingly difficult to think of 'Christianity' as a single, unitary phenomenon. The *fact* that Christianity embraces an endless variety of institutional, liturgical and doctrinal forms is not new; there is ample evidence for it in the New Testament. So the vague uncertainty about the existence of an underlying, unifying factor which would allow all these manifestations to be identified as 'Christian' must have something to do with the way we *perceive* Christianity. Latins and Greeks, Catholics and Protestants, and, more recently, 'North' and 'South' have of course perceived what they took to be the Christian faith in radically different ways, though usually with the serene assurance that their particular confessional viewpoint was the only acceptable one. The success of the Ecumenical Movement and the advent of Religious Studies as a phenomenological discipline have made us aware, not only that *Christians* 'see' their common faith under different aspects, but that what we all agree to call '*Christianity*' is almost impossible to describe adequately under *any* single aspect. The full extent of the problem becomes apparent when we reflect that, even for allegedly 'objective' scholarship, there is no 'neutral ground' above the fray from which all this teeming variety may be viewed 'as it really is'. Whoever we are, and from whatever level of abstraction we choose to view Christianity, we are always necessarily taking up one particular viewpoint rather than others, which we might have chosen had we been born in South Italy rather than North Germany, or had we studied at Chicago rather than Lancaster. The growing awareness that Christianity itself is only one manifestation among others of what some would prefer to call 'faith' and others 'religion' only exacerbates the problem.

In short, we have become aware of the need to scrutinise more closely the interpretative schemes or frameworks with the help of which we inevitably look at Christianity, whether as believers or as scholars. I should like to discuss three such interpretative frameworks or methodological paradigms in the historical order in which they were proposed. Each of them, I believe, improves upon its predecessor, though without supplanting it entirely. I shall try to criticise the deficiencies of each whilst highlighting possible complementarities, in such a way that, cumulatively, the three concepts might provide at least the elements of an approach adequate both to the complex historical phenomenon of Christianity and to our present stage of reflection upon it. I shall begin by reviewing a debate about the 'essence' of Christianity which occupied historians at the turn of the century (1), and I shall then discuss an alternative proposal based on the social science concept of 'identity' (2). I shall conclude by trying to assess the merits of a more recent approach which emphasises the concrete *praxis* of 'liberation'

(3).

### 1. Essence

In the winter of 1899–1900 the doyen of German historians of Christianity, Adolf von Harnack, held open lectures at the University of Berlin. His aim was to give a concentrated account of what is decisively important about the Christian faith in terms that could be understood by all serious seekers after truth in the educated world of the day. The lectures were able to be published that same year under the title *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Harnack, (1900) 1950).

Harnack took up an explicitly historical position as distinct from a speculative, apologetic or theological one (1950: 4 f.); he was not interested in presenting the 'whole' of Christianity, but in laying bare its 'essentials' by the exclusive use of historical method (8 f.). Allowing for a few exceptions in the letters of Paul, he regarded the synoptic Gospels as the only trustworthy historical source for his purpose (12), which was to reconstruct the preaching of Jesus, the end of his life in the service of his calling, and the impression he made on his disciples (19). He devoted by far the greater part of his lectures to the first of these, the preaching, for it enabled him to isolate the essential content of 'the Gospel', and this gave him a criterion by which he could judge the subsequent vicissitudes of the new faith lived by Jesus and inspired in his followers in the course of its history. He was emphatic about the *newness* of this faith with respect to that of the Jews, in which he saw a stern monotheism distorted by ritual and casuistry (cf. 29). This conviction led him to see the fatherhood of God with its promise of divine sonship as the great contribution of Jesus to the religious life of mankind, and though he ranged it alongside the coming of God's kingdom and the superior justice of the command to love one's fellow-humans (31 ff.), it was this privilege of calling God one's father which for Harnack was the summit of all religion and the essential element setting the faith of Jesus apart from all the other faiths of mankind. For him, this was 'the Gospel' in all its purity and simplicity. It was only to be expected that, though Harnack was scrupulously fair in assessing the achievements and aberrations of each of the major historical forms in which the faith of Christians has been embodied, in the end the palm went to Protestantism.

It was this circumstance, no doubt, at least in part, that prompted the French Catholic exegete and historian Alfred Loisy to publish a detailed criticism of Harnack's argument two years later, which under the title *L'Évangile et l'Église* ((1902), 1930) became one of the classics of Modernism and whose prohibition by Rome led to its author's leaving the church. When I said above that Harnack attempted to characterise, not 'faith *in* Jesus', but 'the faith *of* Jesus' as the 'essence' of Christianity, it was in anticipation of Loisy's criticism that Luther would have been profoundly dismayed by this elimination of a crucial element in saving

faith from his conception of 'the Gospel' (1930: xii). For Loisy, it is precisely the faith of the first Christian communities in Jesus as Son of God, as formulated in their preaching and writing, that constitutes 'the Gospel', so that 'Church' and 'Gospel' become mutually related and dependent categories (137). Far from being an immutable essence (xxii) or an abstract Ideal (xxxiii) which could be isolated and used as a criterion with which to sit in judgement on the history of Christianity, the Gospel for Loisy was "a living belief (*croyance*), concrete and complex, whose evolution doubtlessly proceeds from the inner force which gave it consistency (*l'a faite durable*), but which was no less necessarily influenced in everything, and from the outset, by the milieu in which it came into being and grew" (69–70). He was able to identify the 'collective life' of the Church with the 'universal life' of the Gospel (167); for him, the Church was "a real institution which continues the real Gospel" (215).

There are some nice ironies here. The Catholic exegete takes the Protestant historian to task for basing his account of Christian faith on a too narrow selection of texts whose authenticity is doubtful (Ch. 1) and accuses him of being "a theologian who takes from history whatever suits his theology" (ix); and as a reward for his apologetic defence of the church he is placed on the Index of forbidden books. Loisy put his finger on one of the major weaknesses in Harnack's presentation, which at the time gave the illusion of being its strength: Harnack needed his abstract 'Gospel', which was ultimately accessible only to the free individual (cf. 1950: 164), in order to have an unassailable criterion for his judgement of Christian history – and as his criterion was Protestant, it is no wonder that his judgement turned out to favour Protestantism. This was acknowledged by one of the most important protestant participants in the debate, the historian and sociologist Ernst Troeltsch, writing in 1903 (Troeltsch, 1922: 389). But instead of becoming bogged down in interconfessional polemics, Troeltsch set out to lay bare the methodological presuppositions of any attempt to describe the 'essence' of a religion.

For Troeltsch, the whole point about an historical 'essence' is that it contains the seeds of future growth-in-continuity (cf. 420). Troeltsch could thus sum up his thesis in the pregnant phrase: "*Wesensbestimmung ist Wesensgestaltung*" (431), "To determine the essence is to shape it anew", just as the Reformers did in the 16th century. This is why he considered it illegitimate to reconstruct the 'essence' of Christianity from the initial period (414) or the preaching of Jesus (417) alone, without taking into account the community and its further development. It is impossible to extract this 'essence' from the Bible alone, for determining the essence involves "a synthesis of history and the future" (447). But the problem remains that of continuity: how does one remain assured of continuity while "shaping the continuum anew"? (432). As Troeltsch himself concedes, we are dealing with "the great general problem of the relationship of history and norms" (433–4).

Troeltsch achieved something of a synthesis between the positions of Harnack and Loisy, and in doing so he laid the foundations for tackling the problem of continuity-in-change in any religious tradition. To take but one example, Buddhists are conceivably faced with comparable difficulties in deciding whether the Theravāda is merely atrophied or especially faithful to the teachings of the Enlightened One; whether the contentious prophetic figure of Nichiren is authentically Buddhist; whether Zen or the Tantra are not implicit denials of the *dhamma*, and so on. It is in fact on the basis of Troeltsch's work that the prospect has been opened up of a 'comparative hermeneutics' which would examine such problems in the contexts of various religious traditions (cf. Pye and Morgan, 1973). But Troeltsch's debt to Hegelianism and his residual loyalty to Protestant subjectivism prevented him from reaching a really satisfactory solution to the problem he was among the first to recognise: how do norms, with their claim to absolute validity, operate among the contingencies of history, and how is an 'essence' conceivable whose very nature is change? This failure is characteristic of his whole noble attempt to mediate between the passing age of abstract ideals and imperishable truths and the coming period of historical awareness and empirical analysis of society.

For my own part, I do not see much point in continuing to worry about the concept of 'essence' in the hope of teasing out some further aspect which will make it more adequate to the problems of continuity raised by the history of Christianity. To speak of 'essences', whether Hegelian or otherwise, in such a connection, let alone making them the chief object of one's study, is to come dangerously close to reifying those methodological abstractions which we undeniably need if we are to discern patterns in the flux of history. But we must not confuse the methodological tools we are using with the historical materials on which we are working.

I believe a more fruitful line of enquiry can be opened up by scrutinising more closely the very notion of 'Christianity' as one religious entity among other such which we usually distinguish to our satisfaction by labelling each with some particular 'ism' of our own making. Almost twenty years ago, the distinguished Canadian religionist Wilfred Cantwell Smith made the intriguing suggestion, passed over somewhat condescendingly by many of his colleagues, that the idea we so easily take for granted – that there are such things as 'religions' – is itself the product of a very specific historical development (Smith, (1962) 1978). It was only after the Reformation and its obsession with confessional boundaries and the Enlightenment with its penchant for abstract, impersonal thinking that *religio Christiana* came to designate the religious institution to which one belonged (39 ff.), and only in the 18th century did the term 'Christianity' come into general use (76–77).

In between, however, came an event of enormous importance which was largely instrumental in precipitating this change in the Christian

mentality, but which historians of Christianity have generally succeeded in repressing, thus effectively excluding it from their field of vision. I refer to the advent of Islam like a sudden storm from the Arabian desert. In order to explain this 'special case', as he calls it (Ch. 4), Smith draws our attention to what may fairly be described as the first situation of explicit religious pluralism in history, which emerged in the Middle East in the wake of Hellenistic culture and Christian proselytism in their interaction with Oriental cults and Persian dualism (19). In this confused and unsettled milieu there emerged the first person in history to deliberately and consciously 'found a religion', complete with holy scripture: the would-be prophet Mani. His monumental achievement places him on a quite different – and considerably lower – level from the Buddha, Moses or Jesus (95 ff.), but it prepares the ground for Muhammad, who 'founded' Islam and 'recorded' its holy book in a sense quite new in the history of religion. Yet even here, in a way quite analogous to the case of 'Christianity', it is submission to Allah (*islām*) as one's personal religion (*dīn*) which characterises the early writings; only in the classical and medieval periods does the term 'Islam' as the designation of 'the religion of Muslims' draw alongside 'faith' (*īmān*) as an accepted term, and it is not till the 19th century that it gains the ascendancy as "a direct consequence of apologetics" (115), i.e. after contact with Western influence and scholarship. (cf. 116).

Islam, then, was born with an unusually developed awareness of itself as 'a religion' with internal coherence and an international mission of which politics and war were integral parts. Its almost immediate and totally unexpected invasion of both Europe and India, almost successful in the former case and largely successful in the latter, started the long processes of internal evolution which eventually brought 'Christianity' and 'Hinduism' into general awareness as religious systems clearly distinguished from one another and from all others in the minds of those who adhered to them.

By now it should be apparent that there are problems involved in regarding 'Christianity' as a unitary phenomenon with an 'essence' that can be identified independently of all particular historical situations and cultural contexts. Even our habit of speaking about Christianity as 'a religion' among other such has been called into doubt. I believe these difficulties can be mitigated, however, if we try a different approach.

## 2. Identity

The simplest way to understand what is meant by 'identity' is to ask oneself, 'Who am I?' Most of us are able to answer this question by mentioning our names and telling stories about where we come from, who our parents were, and what we have done with our lives up till now. In the form of narrative, we establish continuity in time and strengthen our conviction that we are 'identical with ourselves' (the original meaning of the term in the philosophy of German idealism). Others, however,

such as orphans, refugees and those suffering from amnesia, are unable to do this, and their plight introduces us to the complex problems underlying this simple concept. The achievement of personal identity — and under the confusing conditions of contemporary pluralism it is often a hard-won achievement — represents a precarious victory in the struggle to reconcile the conflicting claims of stability and change; to find a balance between secure possession of what we value and 'live by' and the need to adapt to changing circumstances. My thesis in what follows will be that societies and their institutions are caught up in a comparable process (cf. Mol, 1976: 55–65).

Every time we address another human being whom we take to be a conscious subject like ourselves, in possession of his or her faculties, we make two basic assumptions. The first is that we are in the presence of an *autonomous centre* from which acts of initiative and communication originate independently of environmental or other observable influences. At the same time, we assume that we would have no access to this centre of the personality were it not mediated to us by a complex, socially constructed pattern of behaviour, a *social medium* through which alone the person becomes available to us for purposes of communication. George Herbert Mead (1934) dubbed these two components of personal identity the 'I' and the 'me' (173–178). Neither can be meaningfully conceived without the other; their action upon one another is reciprocal; and only together do they make up the 'self' which, though constituted by society, yet acts autonomously upon the society which constitutes it.

Of course we must be extremely careful in transposing this conception of identity from social psychology to the sphere of religious history. Yet as long as we remain aware that we are dealing, not with objects of historical enquiry, but with methodological tools, the same caution which caused us to reject the notion of 'essence' might well incline us to accept that of 'identity' if it serves our purpose. For myself, I am convinced that a re-conception of Christian history in terms of a search for identity is worth the attempt, a position I shall defend presently.

When Troeltsch went to the length of suggesting that "The essence of Christianity contains in itself a polarity and its formulation must be dualist" (1922: 421–2) and concluded that "one only possesses the essence in the connection (*Zusammenhang*, between the initial period and the subsequent development, J.M.), and in this connection the preaching of Jesus is the stronger (factor)" (423), his thought can fairly be interpreted as referring to what I have called the 'autonomous centre' — Jesus and his teaching — and its 'social medium' — the community's response to Jesus and its transmission of his teaching. There is indeed a sense in which 'the Gospel' as our abstract expression of this centre must be given priority over the medium of its transmission, yet Loisy was surely right in insisting on the mutual complementarity of Church and Gospel in this process, while acknowledging that "What constitutes

the identity of the church or of man is not the permanent immobility of external forms, but the continuity of existence and of the consciousness of being beneath the perpetual transformations which are the condition and the manifestation of life" (1930: 158–9).

It is difficult to test the explanatory power of an hypothesis as general as the one I am proposing, especially when it is almost entirely methodological in scope, but in what follows I would like to give some indications of the difference the concept of 'identity', as a relationship between 'autonomous centre' and 'social medium' might make to the way we study the history of Christianity. In the personal sphere, identity can *only* be attained through interaction with others (with reference to this, Mead spoke of society as the 'generalised other', 1934: 154). If our thesis holds good, the same should also be true of 'Christianity' as a socio-cultural phenomenon. The possibility of verifying this is often obscured by the fact that historians of Christianity tend to treat their subject as an exclusively European development largely independent of outside influences. Yet the formation of what we know as 'Medieval Christendom', for instance, can be more adequately explained as an interaction of Jewish, Muslim and Christian forces (cf. Pirenne, 1941: 141 ff.).

Just as it is the encounter with the other, first in the protective family circle, but later – and crucially – in the strange world outside with its surprises and challenges, that allows personality to develop to the stage where it is in secure possession of an unmistakeable 'identity', so in the history of religions it is not only continuity with one's origins, but equally encounter, interaction and dialogue with alternative ways of believing that allow faith to reach full maturity. I cannot even say 'You are different from me; your culture, your faith are strangers to mine' without implying that there is indeed such a thing as *my specific and inalienable religious identity*. The 'autonomous centre' of my faith is usually given to me in the earliest, pre-reflective stages of socialisation, but I can only discover its full scope by subjecting it, consciously and continuously, to such encounters with what is alien to it; and exactly the same applies to the community to which I belong with its collective identity. It is by committing myself to this, indeed, that I maintain my individual identity, both personal and religious.

Perhaps Wilfred Cantwell Smith's attempt to mediate between 'faith' and 'cumulative tradition' in the history of religion (in the singular!) comes closest to what I am trying to say (cf. Smith, 1978: 156 ff.). Yet his insistence on discovering what looks like *theistic* faith in any and every religious tradition as a quality prior to and constitutive of humanity itself possibly prejudices the issue by making 'cumulative tradition' and its system of 'beliefs' an arbitrary and inessential adjunct of a sort of realised transcendence (this position is spelled out more clearly in Smith, 1979). A social science approach to religion, by contrast, would insist with Niklas Luhmann (1977) that the social genesis of 'meaning' is the

presupposition of religious sensibility, and with Hans Mol (1976) that the precise function of religion is to 'sacralise' the identities generated by the social process, thus making them impervious to criticism and integral to the continuity of society and its institutions. My designation of the contextual aspects of Christianity as the 'social medium' of an 'autonomous centre', which for Christians is and remains the figure of Jesus and the Gospel teaching, is an attempt to retain what is valuable in both the historical and the sociological approaches.

Christian identity, as the fragile result of continual search and struggle, was not the later product of some unforeseen aberration of Christian history, but was at issue in the life of the Christian community from the very beginning. If Rosemary Ruether's analysis of the conflict of the first Christians with their Jewish co-religionists is correct, specifically Christian faith in Jesus was born in a crisis of Jewish identity (cf. Ruether, 1979). We must not imagine that 'the Gospel' existed initially in some sort of pure state, only later to be subjected to the stresses and stains of history and the vagaries of interpretation. The gospels show us clearly enough that Jesus himself had to struggle to achieve his identity as Son of Man and messianic saviour of his people, and for his first followers, disparate groups loosely allied as a Jewish sect in a Hellenistic environment, the struggle was in sense even more difficult. Historians of Christianity, often more preoccupied with theology than with historical explanation, do not always make this clear to us. It is thus peculiarly gratifying to find a theologian as eminent as Edward Schillebeeckx, in his monumental study of Jesus, unconsciously echoing Loisy when he identifies the "constant unitive factor" holding together the diverse manifestations of earliest Christian faith as being simply "the Christian movement itself" (Schillebeeckx, 1979: 56). And, if we repudiate what Cantwell Smith calls the "big-bang theory" of religious origins, "the notion that a religion begins with one great seismic event" (Smith, 1981: 155), we realise that the Christian movement is still in motion, though it has grown incomparably more complex in the course of time and interaction with a variety of cultures and is still mediating to us the many facets of the central reality at the core of faith. An increasing number of Christians today, however, are impatient with this pretended solution to the problem of how we look at Christianity; indeed, they would dispute the importance of the very question of Christian 'identity'. In conclusion, I shall try to do justice to their objections.

### 3. Liberation

Hugo Assmann throws down his challenge to the whole elaborate enterprise of biblical hermeneutics, the art of interpreting classical texts in the medium of tradition, with the terse statement: "The original 'text' has become our reality and our practice" (Assmann, 1976: 104). For the man who proposed suspending communication with the West and its

policies – and theologies – of dominance, there is no time to be lost trying to discern the ‘specifically Christian’ contribution to revolution and to devise a political ‘third way’ to prevent contamination by competing ideologies. “In the Bible, no message is valid unless it is ‘made true’ in practice” (Assmann, 1976: 64), and “faith must be understood as basically its practice” (80). Disillusionment with ‘development’ in the interests of the West has led to the demand for ‘liberation’, and “the personal experience of belonging to dominated nations has produced the theology of liberation” (52). Though by no means all Latin American Christians share Assmann’s more radical views, basically he is merely putting into sharp focus a broad movement at all levels of church life there.

In Asia, many Christians are also talking about the ‘practice of liberation’, though often they mean the *spiritual* practice of *transcendent* liberation as taught by Buddhism and Hinduism. Kadowaki (1979) uses Zen *koāns* in the light of meditative experience to point up the immediately practical significance of Gospel sayings whose meaning we thought we understood, and Panikkar (1978) maintains that he who would ‘translate’ Hindu spirituality and doctrine to his fellow-Christians “has to be, to a certain extent ... converted to the tradition from which he is to participate fully in “the intra-religious dialogue” (Panikkar, 1978: xxvi; cf. 27). The Latin American and Asian attempts to create ‘contextual’ theologies in their very different cultural settings take very little notice of one another, the exception being those theologians like Sebastian Kappen in India and Aloysius Pieris in Sri Lanka who participate in the activities of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Yet they have in common a strong emphasis on practice, whether spiritual or political, and a tendency to regard the preservation of Christian – let alone confessional – ‘identity’ as secondary to the achievement of ‘liberation’ in all its dimensions, however it be motivated and symbolised, indeed, one is tempted at times to speak of a liberation *from* identity.

Even in Western scholarship there is discernable what I shall call for the sake of brevity a *search for the Jewish Jesus*, evident in attempts to reconstruct the social history of the earliest ‘Jesus movement’ (Theißen, 1977; cf. Schottroff and Stegemann, 1978) and to determine the theological significance of Jesus’ Jewishness (Ruether, 1979). Parallel to this, however, there is what I shall call with similar license a *search for the Gnostic Christ*, stimulated by the new interest of theologians in Gnosticism (Pagels, 1979). There is also a disturbing analogy between the original Christian encounter with Gnosticism and the contemporary challenge to Christian faith from Indian religion. In the long view of history, the church of the ecumenical councils and the medieval papacy carried the day; but many are asking at what spiritual cost Christian ‘identity’ was thus preserved.

Once again, each of the tendencies I have tried to pinpoint, despite

their widely differing focus on the 'Jewish Jesus' and the 'Gnostic Christ', values 'liberation', however understood, above 'identity' (if this is taken to mean the preservation of the 'specifically Christian' rather than 'finding oneself' in the individual sense). If my analysis is at all correct, an increasing number of influential Christians feel that Christian identity, at least as this is enshrined in the doctrines and institutions of 'official' Christianity, can and should be put at risk for the sake of the greater good of *living* the faith *in* the complex, real-life situations of the contemporary world, so that theologians are coming to regard themselves as mere spokesmen and -women for the 'popular' Christianity of 'basic communities' (cf. Metz, 1980, who compares the 'basic community church' of today with the traditional 'religious order church'). This movement, of course, if such it is, is fraught with ambiguities: who are 'the people', soberly scrutinised? And in what precisely would their 'liberation' consist? The more thoughtful protagonists of liberation theology, such as Segundo (1976: 183-240), are well aware of these ambiguities.

Now that the age-old attempt to define the 'essence' of Christianity once and for all and independently of historical circumstances has been shown to be futile in the face of social conditioning and cultural interaction, we seem to be left with the tension between 'identity' and 'liberation', or (in the terms of a debate between Gadamer, 1971, and Habermas, 1971; cf. Tracy, 1981: 73 ff., for its transposition to the theological arena) 'hermeneutics' and 'praxis', as the most satisfactory way of looking at Christianity today. Our use of words such as 'essential' or 'central' still betrays our need to speak as if some timeless essence of Christianity were available to us, but despite the pretensions of both Hegelian and Neo-Scholastic theologies we now realise that it is as inaccessible to us as the 'I' of personality without the meditation of the socially determined 'me'. Thus do Panikkar and Cantwell Smith distinguish between personal 'faith' and the intellectual 'beliefs' that express it in different cultures, and Segundo, well aware that ideology is the prerequisite of revolutionary commitment, goes so far as to say that faith without ideology is dead (cf. Segundo, 1976: 97-124). The practice of liberation, it would seem, at least for a broad spectrum of contemporary Christians, is the only link between the cutting edge of experience to motive force of a genuinely Christian self-understanding. Each reinforces the other, and always with reference to a very specific local situation. By contrast, those at present engaged in engineering 'global theologies' (can it be by chance that they are all to be found in the universities of the 'North?') will have to face the question *whose* theology this could conceivably be; *whose* religion, psychologically and sociologically, is 'universal religion'?

Dr John May

Melanesian Council of Churches, P.N.G.

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