



Who do you think you are? Thinking Like a Christian April-June 2020

7: Liberalism: Putting God in a Hutch

1. Immanuel Kant: High Priest of the Enlightenment

1724-1804. Lived his whole life in Königsberg, East Prussia (Kaliningrad, Russia, today)

A 'Copernican revolution' in our knowledge... not God at the centre, but us.

Thus all knowledge is created by us.

For things we can experience... that's how it should be

For things we can't experience... illusion

And so the world is divided into two: *Phenomena* and *Noumena*.

And still we can't stop. We carry on synthesising, assembling... until we arrive at the idea of *God*.

If the question is ... whether this being (= God) is a substance, of the greatest reality, necessary etc, then I answer that this question has no significance at all. For all the categories through which I attempt to frame a concept of such an object are of none but empirical use, and they have no sense at all when they are not applied to objects of possible experience, i.e. to the world of sense.
(Kant, 'Critique of Pure Reason')

So can God be known?

After Kant the world of knowledge is divided into Rationalists and Romanticists. Those who think that the Phenomena are what matters, and those who think that the noumena are what matters. Reason, or feeling.

But how can you know that anything about God is true? You can't see him, hear him or touch him, can you?

Isn't God just too big, and too mysterious, for us to say anything useful about?

- What things like this have been said to you?

- How might you begin to answer?

2. Friedrich Schleiermacher

1768-1834

Grew up in German 'Pietism' – similar to English 'Evangelicalism'.

Determined to rescue Christianity from Kant.

Accepted Kant was basically right

But had missed something: *religious feeling*

In other words, what Christianity is *really* about is your sense of dependence – on *something* greater than you. And all Christian doctrines are just us putting together in our heads a sort of container for our feeling of dependence. But the feelings are what matters. They are the true religion.

If you have only given attention to these dogmas and opinions, therefore, you do not yet know religion itself, and what you despise is not it. Why have you not penetrated deeper to find the kernel of this shell? I am astonished at your voluntary ignorance, ye easy-going inquirers, and at the all too quiet satisfaction with which you linger by the first thing presented to you. Why do you not regard the religious life itself, and first those pious exaltations of the mind in which all other known activities are set aside or almost suppressed, and the whole soul is dissolved in the immediate feeling of the Infinite and Eternal?

(Schleiermacher, 'On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers')

'It helped me as I began to sift the faith of my fathers and to cleanse thought and feeling from the rubbish of antiquity. When the God and the immortality of my childhood vanished from my doubting eyes it remained to me.'

(Schleiermacher, 'On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers')

Schleiermacher protects God from Kant's deified liberty by putting him in a hutch marked 'religious feeling'. He is quite safe there. Kant can't touch him.

Surely all religions are basically the same thing at heart?

Science deals with facts and observations; religion with meaning. They're just different things.

- What things like these have been said to you? Give examples, if you can.
- Look up Jeremiah 19:4-5 and Acts 5:29-31. How do these help you answer?

The invention of 'religion' as we know it.

Bizarrely has a strong belief in a real, unseen structure to the universe... just not a Christian one.

3. Liberalism

Schleiermacher's project swept the board of the Protestant churches of Europe and America in an extraordinary way. Today liberalism remains in control of most large church bodies, much as Arianism controlled most of the church in the mid-4th century.

Liberalism:

- Is all about the experience of God.
- But when we ask who this God is... there are no details.
- Loves the Bible. And yet what it means by that is entirely different to what Christianity has always meant.
- Is fiercely moralistic.
- Is ready to give away any ground on questions of real knowledge
- Why 'liberalism'?

Liberalism is the great heresy of the church up to today.

4. What's wrong with liberalism?

J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*. (1923)

a) It is Gnostic

Gnosticism is about have a secret knowledge of reality which doesn't come from the Bible, which shows us what the Bible really means.

But is it really doctrine as such that is objected to, and not rather one particular doctrine in the interests of another?... there are doctrines of modern liberalism, just as tenaciously and intolerantly upheld as any doctrines that find a place in the historic creeds... These doctrines are, as we shall see, contrary to the doctrines of the Christian religion. But doctrines they are all the same.

(Machen, Christianity and Liberalism, p16)

So where does this doctrinal system come from? Not the Bible.

b) It is Arian

There is a profound difference, then, in the attitude assumed by modern liberalism and by Christianity toward Jesus the Lord. Liberalism regards Him as an Example and Guide; Christianity, as a Saviour; liberalism makes Him an example for faith; Christianity, the object of faith... Liberalism regards Jesus as the fairest flower of humanity; Christianity regards Him as a supernatural Person. (p82)

c) It is Pelagian

There is no salvation in Liberalism. The *events* of Jesus' life don't matter; because Jesus did not need to *do* anything to save us.

The coming of Jesus was understood now [i.e. by the church after the resurrection] as an act of God by which sinful men were saved... yet we are now asked to believe that the thing that has given Christianity its power all through the centuries was a blunder, and that the originators of the movement misunderstood radically the meaning of their master's life and work, and that it has been left to us moderns to get the first inkling of the initial mistake. (p25)

d) It is not Christian.

... modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions. (p6)

Fundamentally: because it dethrones God and places us in his place.

Remember Kant's starting point...

How might you answer:

'I would argue that healthy doubt (questioning one's beliefs) is perhaps the best defense against unhealthy doubt (questioning God). When we know how to make a distinction between our ideas about God and God himself, our faith remains safe when one of those ideas is seriously challenged' (Rachel Held Evans)

God is love, and that is why we must never criticise who people choose to love

We must seek after God, just like we see Moses and Isaiah and John doing in the Bible.

Of course we can't believe the Bible is literally true; but it is full of spiritual insight.

You can sum up Christianity as: What would Jesus do?

Real faith is about questions, not answers; about love, not truth.