

Gnosticism and Legalism

Colleagues,

ThTh #423, the posting 2 weeks ago, “Tranquebar Tercentenary Celebration – Ziegenbalg Arrives in India 1706” concluded:

“Whether in goatskin [Ziegen-balg] or camelskin [John the Baptist] the real legacy was the same: ‘Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.’”

After I shipped it off, I kept thinking about that last sentence. Specifically with reference to the Hindu world that Ziegenbalg entered on July 9, 1706. No Hindu sage, so far as I know, even in the wide denominational diversity of Hinduism, would ever say that about any human-or divine-figure. No third party can un-sin sinners. Sinners have to purge themselves of their own sins-or at the very least, do SOMETHING. And the manifold smorgasbord of sacrifices and disciplines available in Hinduism is the toolkit for getting un-sinned. That was what we learned in our three-month mission-stint (granted, that’s not very long) among Christians who’d come from that Hindu world.

And for the Muslim Imam who came as guest speaker for a class I taught, it was the same. One student asked: “Is there anything comparable in Islam to the Good News of forgiveness of sins because of Jesus?” He answered: “The Quran teaches that Allah is merciful and just, but that somebody else living 2000 years ago—even Jesus, the revered prophet—could cleanse me of my sins makes no sense.” Even worse, the very notion bordered on the morally reprehensible. “For the sinning I do, I am responsible for un-doing it. I have to do the atoning. That task simply cannot be transferred to someone else.”

With the Buddhism that Ziegenbalg also encountered in India, the

same is true. And is still true today. No surrogate can take over the task of my salvation. A guru can indeed assist me, by showing me the many ways to move toward enlightenment, and suggest the way best suited for me. But his role is to teach ME how do do it, so that it finally works for me. No substitutionary Lamb of God can take over my responsibility to work out my own salvation.

That same Gospel claim—Jesus as God’s Lamb who un-sins the world—was what scandalized many “really religious” Jews of Jesus’ day and led them finally to pass him by on the other side. That’s evident in the four Gospels as Jesus steadfastly hob-knobs with sinners as their friend and now and then flat-out forgives them.

In the epistles of the NT, the opening chapter of church history, we see evidence for two dominant self-salvation alternatives that competed with the Lamb-of-God good news right from the start. Scholars have given them the labels “gnosticism” (or even, “pneumatic gnosticism”) and “legalism” (often focused on actions mandated in the book of Leviticus). In the epistles we confront these alternatives, not outside of the Christian community, but inside. The former is prominent in the two Corinthian letters, the latter among the Christians addressed in Galatians. In both cases you have Christians—Christ-confessing folk—adding on a slice of self-salvation to their faith in Christ, the Lamb of God. In Corinth they are not “just” gnostics, but Christian gnostics. In Galatians they are not simply “Judaizers” hyping a “Back to Judaism!” but Christ-confessing Judaizers.

Ten years ago I wrote a few paragraphs on present-day gnosticism and legalism inside the church. But I’d completely forgotten it, and don’t remember any more how it even came about. Just this past week I found that two-pager buried in a file folder that I

hadn't touched for a decade. Russ Saltzmann printed the piece in his September 1996 issue of FORUM LETTER.

I started out citing Luther's bon mot when asked whether the scholastics of the 16th century Roman church or the Enthusiastic radicals (Muentzer and company) were the greater nemesis to the Gospel. Said Brother Martin: "They may appear to be two foxes running in opposite directions, but if you look closely, you'll see that their tails are tied together."

[From then on it went like this:]

The common denominator between legalism and gnosticism is three-fold.

1. Some achievement on the part of the believer is the trigger for being a genuine, a complete, Christian. The required achievement regularly centers around two poles: behavioral performance (legalism) or intellectual accomplishment (gnosticism). Within those two categories it can be as varied as you might imagine. It can be an achievement in ethics, experience, piety, intellect, or intellectual sacrifice. Some hurdle to jump over – mystical, doctrinal, libertarian, daring, ascetic – you name it. But as Melanchthon specified in Apology 4, the key verb, no matter which way the foxes seem to be running, is "require." That is where the tails are tied together. This or that something-or-other is required of the candidate before "real" salvation, "real" Christian status, is conferred on a person.
2. The analysis of the sinner's problem in Gnosticism and legalism is structurally the same. It denies (or at least ignores) the deep dimensions of human sinfulness. The dilemma of sinners gets diagnosed at the behavioral level, and may even be diagnosed deeper at the level of the heart

or mind. It could go even to the depth-dimension of Augsburg Confession II: "not fearing God, not trusting God, and being curved into themselves." But then somewhere in, with, and under all that comes the premise that self-help can reverse the diagnosis. Self-help can heal. Oh, to be sure, it may take a guru to get you started in this or that disciplined practice – ethical, experiential, meditative, mystical, aesthetic, et cetera. And it may take immense effort, but the premise is: "You can do it. You can do it, if you will only..." That "if you will only..." is what Melanchthon meant when he said "require" is the language of the law. When the law's language is made the language of salvation, it is legalism. When Gnosticism gets around to its own sort of "requiring," you see the tails tied together.

What is really bad about legalism (also when it comes in a Gnostic format) is that it takes the sinner's accuser – the law of do this/do that – and proposes it as savior. But the first fallacy is its diagnosis of the sinner's malady. It is too shallow.

Biblical metaphors for that malady signal a reality that no self-help can remedy. "Dead in trespasses and sins; at enmity with God; in bondage to sin" are some examples. To self-helpers, that poses the question: What resources are there in corpses to generate their own life, in enemies to extinguish enmity, and in prisoners to liberate themselves?

But it's even worse than that. It's not just that the sinner needs change – radical change – but God has to change, change from being the sinner's executioner, the sinner's own enemy, the sinner's jail keeper. What self-help program are humans capable of to get God to change? How can sinners get God to stop "counting trespasses"

against us, as St. Paul says in II Corinthians 5? The foxes of Gnosticism and legalism are united in denying that the situation is really this bad. And therefore . . .

3. Neither “-ism” needs the crucified and risen Messiah Jesus. Doubtless Jesus will be prominent in the rhetoric of either fox, for the legalisms we encounter in the church are claiming to be Christian. But as the Crucified and Risen Jesus, he won’t be “necessary.” Somebody else, some exemplary figure, some guru, can do the job that needs doing to get the sinner on track again. The rhetoric of “All you’ve got to do is...” signals that Christ is ultimately not necessary.

Instead of the law’s verb “require,” says Melanchthon in Apology 4, the Gospel’s contrasting verb is “offer.” It is the language of gift, the grammar of grace – even when it comes in the imperative mood: “Be reconciled to God!” However, the Gospel’s offer is not just “grace” instead of “performance.” It is the offer of Christ’s own self in place of the self-healer’s own self – dead, imprisoned and at enmity as it is.

The many shallow gospels – non-gospels, actually – on the scene today, both inside the church and outside (FROGBA being one of the major ones in the USA), push all Christians to ask: “Why Jesus?” That has always been the big question coming from world religions. What is there in Jesus, they ask, that we don’t already have with Muhammad, the Buddha, Moses, our Hindu heritage? When facing such classical alternatives to the Gospel – and to the new or old “other gospels” tempting Christians today – the first question to ask is: What’s your diagnosis of what’s wrong with us human beings?

And if, as regularly is the case, the diagnosis never gets

to the third level, then "our" Jesus is probably not needed to heal the malady. Muammad, the Buddha, or even the late Timothy Leary may well be all that is needed to fix a shallow diagnosis. But if the sinner's problem is that God does indeed "count trespasses," then there is a clear and quick answer to the question "Why Jesus?"

Namely, "in him God is doing something different with sinners: not counting our trespases against us, but making him to be our sin (with all its lethal consequences) so that we might become the righteousness of God in him." Does any "other gospel" offer such a FROEHLICHER WECHSEL (Luther's "joyful exchange," bon mot for this passage from II Corinthians 5, Robert Bertram's "sweet swap")? If there is such, then that "other gospel" really is a competitor to the Good News about Jesus. But so far I haven't heard of one that even comes close to "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder