

October Book Summary

What Is the Point of Being a Christian?

Timothy Radcliffe OP

Burns & Oates, 2005, 218 pp., \$19.95

What Christianity is not, Radcliffe explains, is a place for people who are better than everyone else. “The Church is a home for everyone, especially those whose lives are a mess.” (p.4) Faith leads us to freedom, happiness and love.

The first community of Jesus’ followers fell apart on the night of his last supper. Then, with the resurrection, it was reborn in hope. “Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.” (p.17)

“We make sense of our lives by finding a story to tell of them The story we are invited to tell of ourselves is of the journey to God from whom we come.” (p.41) In making that journey, “We must get rid of the God who opposes our freedom, and keeps us trapped in infantile submission.” (p.45)

Christianity promises joy. Radcliffe giggles with H. L. Menchen who “defined Puritanism as the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” (p.50) Instead, he writes that “God’s love is the vast sea in which we float,” (p.55), an image suggested by St. Catherine of Sienna. Our very existence is God’s doing and so “my deepest being is indeed pure gift and in attaining it I discover joy.” (p.63) Jesus has tied our destiny to his and “the empty tomb is good news.” (p.67)

Faith gives us courage. Life entails triumphs and disasters. “The risen Christ is still wounded,” Radcliff writes. (p.74)

The author’s chapter on the body and sexuality points out how fleshy Christianity is. The mystery of the incarnation is that divinity has taken on a body. And, in the end, the gift of Jesus to us was his body – in death and in eucharist. This puts perspective on sexuality. It means living in the reality of who I am and who are the people I love. Passion and desire can drive us to live in fantasy. Chastity brings us down to earth again.” (p.98)

The chapter on truth laments that “political correctness” and eavesdropping technology have made us reluctant to seek and say the truth. Yet “how can we even think about anything if we never had the freedom to try out crazy ideas, float hypotheses and make mistakes.” (p.113) Unfortunately now when we argue, it’s not to seek the truth but to win. And “believers start killing each other. Truth claims are associated with intolerance, arrogance and indoctrination.” Whereas, “Believing that *together* we may arrive at the truth can heal differences.” (p.116)

Radcliffe sometimes sounds like deChardin. “Christ is the one to whom the whole of creation is gathered into unity. So our homecoming is to the whole of humanity.” (p.130) Christianity give us supportive company in pursuing who we are. “One becomes a person through integration into the community, by embracing one’s position and enacting one’s role.” (p.135)

He follows this up in a wonderful section in which he identifies three “idols” whose worship deforms the global village. Limitless desire is the first. We become addicted to shopping driven by clever and ubiquitous marketing. Second is the holy grail of private property. We amass and protect our *stuff* while “eight million people a year die of just being poor.” (p.153) Our patent laws put lifesaving pharmaceutical discoveries out of the reach of poor people who are sick.

The third idol is our establishing money as an end in itself. Money is how CEOs keep score on who is most successful. The 400 richest Americans have an annual income of \$69 billion! “As Christians . . . we must ask what money is for.” (p.155)

Radcliffe deals next with the divisions that pit us against each other in anger. “What young people,” he asks, “are going to find their home in a community that is so angry?” He sees the roots of the liberal-conservative conflict in the Enlightenment whose “thinkers saw themselves as enlightened because they had been liberated from tradition, and above all from the traditions of the Church.” (p.165)

“Today the prophetic challenge is surely to find ways forward beyond division.” (p.166) For Catholics, that division now is between the *Concilium* people who give priority to Vatican II and outreach to build the kingdom on the one hand, and the *Communio* people whose priorities are more internal – doctrinal orthodoxy and traditional devotion. Both are important.

“Root shock” is the term that describes what happens to a neighborhood community when urban renewal tears a highway through it, displacing and separating its continuity. Radcliffe, who sees himself on both sides of the liberal-conservative divide, fears that the Concilium theologians may have driven a highway through the church community knocking down beloved institutions. Religious habits and traditional church architecture, music and devotions were swept away. “We shall rebuild the Church as our common home only if we have the imagination to understand the other’s sense of exile and work to build a community in which they may feel that they too belong.” (p.171)

The Spirit is the breath of life for our church. And breathing involves both breathing in and breathing out. So “We need the inbreathing of Communion Catholics and the breathing out of the Kingdom Catholics.” (p.178)

The Thirty Years War in the seventeenth century pitted Christians against each other and left a bloody and long-lasting legacy of division and suspicion. It generated on both sides what Radcliffe calls a “new dogmatism” that stifled dialogue.

And so we need now an openness to discuss differences with humility and a willingness to learn and search together. “The good shepherd leads his sheep out of the tight and tiny boxes in which we lock ourselves.” (p.187) “We need to give each other courage . . . and relax with each other.” (p.211)

Review by Dan Brent