

The Future of Christian Unity

Judaism is the revelation of the God of Israel. Christianity is the revelation of God in Christ. For Christians, there is no revelation about God's nature after Christ. Because he fulfils Judaism as he understood it, he is a truth fulfilling a truth. This historical specificity is easily overlooked or misunderstood—the revelation of the Cross is *only* true if the revelation of Sinai is true. If you do not believe this, you are not *really* Christian.

In the West, Christians have lost their sense of this historical specificity, having abandoned themselves to the tactic of using fallacious logic—whataboutery, red herrings—to avoid responsibility for the fundamentals of their faith. An early example of this is John 21 where the Risen Jesus asks Peter three times, do you love me? After each response, Jesus gives Peter a command: first, feed my lambs; then, tend my sheep; then, follow me. Peter—often slow to grasp Jesus's meaning—turns and sees the Beloved Disciple following them and asks: "Lord, what about him?" Jesus is emphatic: "... what is that to you? Follow me!" The meaning of this is clear. To follow Jesus is to follow the God of Israel. Those who follow Jesus must not be sidetracked by fallacious logic.

Thankfully, Peter understood the Lord's message fully after the Ascension. He accepted responsibility and went on—with the Apostles—to lead the Church, whose orthodoxy was codified during the first millennium. This orthodoxy was always framed in relation to biblical truth—what the Bible teaches about the God of Israel (Yahweh), the God in Christ (Yeshua)—arriving at a definition of what One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic means.

Unfortunately, parts of the Church relativise this biblical orthodoxy. They do this by following those who confuse the content of Jewish revelation with therapeutic deism and those who confuse the content of Christian revelation with progressive multiculturalism. But the content of Jewish and Christian revelation cannot be relativised or assigned to other contexts. Its historical specificity cannot be gainsaid.

One relativisation is the logical fallacy of treating the three monotheistic revelations—of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as functionally equivalent. To those who promote this fallacy, what Islam teaches about Allah is interchangeable with what Judaism and Christianity teach about God. Those who promote this fallacy appeal to red herrings—like the Koran mentioning Moses, Jesus, and Mary too. They fallaciously use Abrahamism to trace the origins of Islam to Genesis, where Abraham has a child by Hagar his slave (Ishmael) as well as Sarah his wife (Isaac). Isaac inherits God's promise to Abraham, but God has promised Ishmael will also become a nation.

Although the progressive, multicultural zeitgeist treats all religions as similar, it is wrong to treat the three monotheisms as functionally equivalent, thereby losing sight of the unique organic relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Those who feel warm and fuzzy while invoking the old Sunday School song—Father Abraham has many sons; I am one of them and so are you—should remember an uncomfortable truth: Islam is to monotheism what Mormonism is to Christianity.

Of course, Mormonism has assimilated in ways Islam has not, but Mormons can never be part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church while professing Mormonism. Moreover, the *Book of Mormon* is as different from the canonical texts of Hebrew and Christian Scripture—the Bible—as is the Koran. The widespread cultural failure to appreciate this—the memory-holing or wilful ignorance of the fundamentals of Christian belief—has proven disastrous. The only hope for a supposedly Christian civilisation is to understand the basics of Christian revelation—the essence of biblical orthodoxy—and its organic relationship with the basics of Hebrew revelation. Context is important.

The first logical fallacy to challenge a Christian orthodoxy based on biblical revelation was Arianism, a heresy which denied the full divinity

of Jesus by teaching that he was *made* rather than *begotten*, was a created being rather than co-eternal with the Father. This heresy was powerful in the Early Church, and many bishops had Arian sympathies. Emperor Constantine, anxious for the peace of his newly unified empire, called the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) to settle the controversy.

Behind the controversy was a belief—widely held until recently—that the Hebrew scriptures did not contain the theological grammar necessary to articulate the fullness of Christian revelation (a lack made up by Greek philosophy). While tempting, and influential, this belief is fallacious. It depends on the “Athens versus Jerusalem” myth by which Patristic Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism defined themselves in opposition to each other after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

The arc of Christian history might have been different had Christians been more sensitive to Jewish awareness of their culture in relation to other cultures, as revealed in the Bible itself. Long before the Hebrew Bible was finally redacted, and its canon was closed, there were Jewish communities all over the Mediterranean and Near East. The Jewish diaspora was culturally distinct, wherever it existed, but it was never culturally unaware.

As Daniel Boyarin suggests, the myth of Jewish isolationism was never true. In *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (2009), he explores the interface between Jewish and Graeco-Roman culture by constructing a dialogue between Plato and the Talmud to satirise their respective attempts to establish cultural differences and maintain cultural regulation. In *The Jewish Gospels* (2012), he demonstrates how the question is not whether Jesus is the Messiah—for that is a matter of Christian faith—it is whether the Messiah can be divine. In exploring this possibility, he retrieves the Binitarian aspects of Jewish belief in the Second Temple Period which prefigure the Trinitarian aspects of Christian belief. Further, as Michael Heiser demonstrates in *The Unseen Realm* (2015), the Medieval Rabbis were fully aware of the Binitarian (and possibly Trinitarian) implications of the Shema—“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One”—which is why they declared “two powers in heaven” to be heretical, a form of Gnosticism anathema to Rabbinic Judaism.

Arianism was declared a heresy at the Council of Nicaea. The belief that Jesus was begotten, not

made, was established as the Church’s orthodox position on the divinity of Jesus. Moreover, this orthodox position was consonant with biblical truth—what the Bible teaches about the God of Israel, the God in Christ. Thus the canonical unity of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures—the Old and New Testaments—was ratified as the official measure of what One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic means. If a creed does not have scriptural warrant, it cannot be declared orthodox. Also, once Christian orthodoxy has been ordered, it cannot be reordered to suit cultural trends.

The function of the Historic Episcopate—the unbroken line of bishops as successors to the apostles; a continuous succession of authority and doctrine—is to guard and defend the faith of the Universal Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. While the unity of the Church was fractured, first by the Great Schism of 1054 AD between the Greek East and the Latin West, and fragmented further during the Protestant Reformation, the fundamentals of Christian orthodoxy have never changed. Not every Christian sect/cult is part of the Universal Church; nevertheless, the visible unity of the Universal Church is important.

While the unity of the Church was fractured, first by the Great Schism of 1054 AD between the Greek East and the Latin West, and fragmented further during the Protestant Reformation, the fundamentals of Christian orthodoxy have never changed.

In an interview with Peter Seewald, *Light of the World* (2010), Benedict XVI said he was committed to a “restoration of full, visible unity” among Christians, noting that “Paul VI and John Paul II already devoted a great deal of effort to dialogue with Orthodoxy” and “I myself have always had very close contacts with Orthodoxy”:

I do think it is very important for the great Orthodox world, with its internal tensions, to see its interior unity with the worldwide Latin Church, with her very different style. Despite all the cultural differences that have built up over the centuries on account of cultural separations and other factors, it is important that we truly relearn to see and understand our inner spiritual kinship with each other. On this level, I think we are making progress. I do not mean tactical, political progress, but rapprochement on the level of our interior affinity. I find this very consoling.

At this point, Seewald reminded him of well-placed ecumenical reports that “Catholics and

Orthodox have already achieved 97 per cent of ecclesial unity”, while the remaining 3 per cent consists in “the question of papal primacy and jurisdiction”. Benedict said such reports were overconfident, as the question is not just whether the Pope is first among equals—a position the Orthodox would readily accept—but whether the Pope has “specific functions and tasks or not” in relation to the Universal Church:

First of all, there are huge historical and cultural differences. Beyond the doctrinal issues, there are still many steps to be taken at the level of the heart. God still needs to do some work on us here. For the same reason, I would also be shy about making any predictions about when reunion will happen. The important thing is that we truly love each other, that we have an interior unity, that we draw as close together and collaborate as much as we can—while trying to work through the remaining areas of open questions. And it is important for us always to remember in all of this that we need God’s help, that we are incapable of doing this alone.

Benedict is saying that, at the highest levels, reconciliation is happening between Greek East and Latin West. But leaders must take their people with them, and convincing the laity of this reconciliation—it is time for the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church to reunify and continue its journey into Christ—is hard. The message of reconciliation must cut through much noise.

Good noise comes from Bishop Robert Barron and Scott Hahn, whose *Word on Fire* and *St Paul Centre* ministries are superb platforms dedicated to catechesis, teaching Catholics the fundamentals of their faith, making up for any lack at the parish and diocesan levels. Bad noise comes from internet content creators pondering their versions of Catholic truth. A newsworthy subject here is the controversy surrounding the Traditional Latin Mass.

In 2007, Benedict issued *Summorum Pontificum*, specifying the circumstances by which the Tridentine Mass can be celebrated. In 2021, Francis issued *Traditionis custodes*, which reversed Benedict’s more permissive stance. Leo is navigating a path through the controversy, noting that divisions over the Latin Mass must never be used as a political tool, a proxy for deeper disputes, an excuse for advancing other topics. He notes that the Latin Mass can be celebrated at any time, provided it uses the Vatican II rite. At stake is Leo’s need to inculcate the teachings of Vatican II in the Church—broadly—and manoeuvre the faithful through their confusion

from the mixed messages of Benedict and Francis. Vatican II is binding upon the faithful. It is the Church’s mind.

Visible unity between Catholicism and Orthodoxy is one thing; visible unity between Catholicism and Protestantism is another. As Benedict explained to Seewald, Vatican II employed the term “ecclesial community” in “an attempt to capture what is distinctive about Protestant Christianity and give it positive expression”, as a series of polities “based on a new understanding, according to which a church consists, not in the institution, but in the dynamism of the Word that gathers people into a congregation”.

Yet the Universal Church is a historical specificity, not just a dynamic spiritual reality. To establish visible unity with this historical specificity, each “ecclesial community” must define and defend its understanding of what One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic means. Further, it cannot do this simply by repeating Reformation shibboleths about the errors of Catholicism. If the world has changed, the fundamentals of Christian orthodoxy have not. They remain what they have always been.

An “ecclesial community” maintains its Christian orthodoxy by its equivalent of the Historic Episcopate, the function of which is to guard and defend the faith articulated in the Nicene Creed. Until the end of the colonial era, Anglicanism did this admirably, often heroically. In the post-colonial era, however, its provinces in the Global North wilfully separated from the orthodoxy of the Universal Church by consecrating themselves to the deranging zeitgeist of the 1960s sexual revolution.

Other mainstream Protestant denominations face similar tensions. Theologian Carl Trueman has coined the term “Big Eva” to describe the influential network of celebrity pastors, major conferences, and parachurch organisations which wield immense power in American evangelicalism, by promoting a culturally acceptable, less “fundamentalist” stance. The problem here is that “fundamentalist” has become a term of abuse, a pejorative invoked for negative, judgmental reasons.

The Christian fundamentalist movement was a reaction against theological liberalism, scientific theories like evolution, and modernist trends in biblical criticism. The movement emphasised core doctrines—the inerrancy of Scripture, the Divinity of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Birth, a substitutionary theory of the Atonement, and the bodily return of Jesus at the Second Coming. By this definition, Christian fundamentalism—while anathema to the progressive values of the contemporary West—represents the faith articulated in the Nicene Creed, and hence of Christian orthodoxy.

The catechetical challenge for Protestants is convincing the culture that the Christian fundamentals *are* Christian orthodoxy. In a specifically American (and hence Evangelical) context, this means recapturing a sense of the culture's obligation to the Hebrew Bible, rescuing Puritanism and Calvinism from the void of negative assumptions about them, whether glib or simply contemptuous. The founding of the United States was, foremost, a reformist Puritan experiment where the Hebrew Bible was used as a template. As Marilynne Robinson has observed: "Ideas about the nature of a good society were developed and applied in New England ... the Puritans were intent on a reformist experiment, as much political as religious."

It is necessary for all forms of Protestant Evangelicalism to stop promoting a culturally acceptable, less "fundamentalist" stance, and return to teaching the Christian fundamentals. Douglas Wilson's clever award-winning novel *Evangelicallyfish* (2011) brilliantly exposes the disorder, hypocrisy, corruption, and sexual immorality in a megachurch, because the greatest evil of the present age is Christians behaving like pagans while pretending to be Christians.

Protestants must stop *pretending* to be Christians. Wilson's point is that those who profess Christ cannot remake him in their image, they must stick to the fundamentals of Christian orthodoxy. If that is not a message enculturated Christians want to hear—because they misread the zeitgeist—the zeitgeist is not Christian, it is something else entirely, something dangerous and dark.

When thinking about the future of Christian unity, full visible unity is improbable. If it happens, it will happen between Catholicism and Orthodoxy first. The best that can be hoped for between Catholicism and Protestantism is rapprochement on the level of what Benedict calls interior affinity. Before this can occur, however, several things must happen.

Christians must accept that the old Catholic/Protestant rivalries are obsolete. In the twenty-first century, the real struggle is the Universal Church defending its orthodoxy from attacks by the progressive, secular world. Apparently, there are signs that the cultural mood is changing, with many connect-

ing or reconnecting with Christianity. Wherever this is occurring, Christians must be careful to observe biblical orthodoxy—the Christian fundamentals—rather than a progressive faith that tailors itself to the sociological prejudices and political biases of free will and personal conscience.

Jesus is not a hero who fixes everything thought to be wrong with the body politic. In Matthew 5:17, he said he has come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, not to abolish them. Later, in Matthew 10:34, he said he has not come to bring peace but a sword. Jesus fulfils Judaism as he understood it. This means the historical specificity of his relationship with Second Temple Judaism is non-negotiable and its nuances should be acknowledged, particularly the difficult nuances.

Christians often adopt an anti-nomian attitude to the Law, assuming salvation by grace frees them from its obligations. But in *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937), Bonhoeffer distinguishes between cheap grace (forgiveness without repentance) and costly grace (a radical call to discipleship). Paul expresses this differently when he says, without the Law, sin would be left undefined: "... had it not been for the Law, I should have not known sin" (Romans 7:7).

Flowing from this, Christians must accept that their relationship with Judaism is more important than their relationship with any other religion, including (and perhaps particularly) Islam. In the latter case, the point made earlier about Islam being to monotheism what Mormonism is to Christianity should be taken seriously.

Finally, all Christians—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—should pay attention to Leo XIV's pontificate. Leo is fully aware of the tensions between progressives and conservatives in the Church—the issues they raise, their implications for the Universal Church. He knows he needs to inculcate the teachings of Vatican II in the Church—broadly—and manoeuvre the faithful through their confusion from the mixed messages of Benedict and Francis. Vatican II is binding. It is the Church's mind.

Michael Giffin is a retired Anglican priest in the Diocese of Sydney. He trained for Anglican orders at St Paul's National Seminary, Kensington, under the House of Bishops and the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart.

Flowing from this, Christians must accept that their relationship with Judaism is more important than their relationship with any other religion, including (and perhaps particularly) Islam.
