

## WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?

### A Sermon by Douglas John Hall<sup>1</sup>

Religion is a dangerous thing. That is perhaps the paramount lesson taught us by the startling events of September 11, 2001—though readers of the Bible ought to have known that lesson long before; for the Bible has a profound and sustained quarrel with religion. It knows how frequently human pride and wilfulness uses *religious* fervour to inspire acts of violence, revenge and other forms of wickedness. As the late Robert McAfee Brown once put it, “There is no bad idea that cannot be made worse by giving it religious sanction.”

In the post 9/11 world it has happened, therefore, that responsible and thinking believers in all of the world’s great religions have felt challenged to distinguish the things that really belong to their traditions from ideas, motives and deeds that do not. For instance, many Islamic thinkers today are concerned to show that the concept of *jihad* does not mean a holy war against all non-Muslims, but a disciplined attempt on the part of Muslims themselves to struggle against that within them that resists the will of Allah. And many Jewish scholars are concerned to distinguish between loyalty to Judaism and an unquestioning support of the State of Israel.

Christianity, too, is challenged to assume a greater self-critical awareness in this new world order. Is Christianity to be equated with ‘Christendom’?—or with Western Civilization?—or with ‘The American Way’? What, really, is Christianity?

Some of you may remember that, last year, when I was fortunate enough to spend a little time among you, I presented three lectures entitled, “What Christianity is Not.” Since then, I have pursued that same theme in other places, because I feel that the least we can do, as Christian scholars today, is to identify the greatest misrepresentations of our faith at work in contemporary civilization. On several occasions when I have given these lectures, individuals in my audiences have said to me, ‘Yes, we agree that Christianity is not these things that you have named; but can you please say that—in your opinion, at least—Christianity is?’”

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I reminded my challengers on these occasions that I had written a rather large number of books trying to do just that; but obviously they wanted something more immediate and portable. And that is why I put together the short sermon you are about to hear. As I cast about in my mind for a scriptural text on which to base it, what came to me in a rather insistent way was not a biblical text but a line from a novel by Avery Corman, a New York writer of Jewish faith. You may not know the author or the novel in question, but you are probably acquainted with a film that was based on the novel. Both novel and film were called, "*Oh! God.*"

You'll remember, probably, the basic idea of the film: God, in the lovable form of old George Burns, appears on the scene in a large American city because He is very worried about the state of the earth. He insinuates Himself into the life of a rather klutzy young grocery clerk (but in the book it's an aspiring writer of novels), and tells him, "Look, you've got to do something about the world!" The writer, who is a sceptic, finds himself becoming more and more interested in God's concern; but just when he seems most 'hooked' the subject, God informs him that He (God) has to leave: he must go and visit the animals, who think He neglects them. The writer is crestfallen. "But I'm just getting to know you!" he says, "What should I do?" "You're a writer," God answers, "so—*write!*" "What will I write?", the author asks in desperation. "What's *the message?*"

God rather shrugs his shoulders at this point, as if He thought 'the message' were pretty obvious; but then, relenting, He agrees to put 'the message' into as few words as possible—one sentence, a sort of James Joycean sentence without breaks: "*I'm here and I like you a lot and it can work and try not to hurt one another too much.*"

And that's my text for today, because I think it covers all the really important bases of biblical faith—Christianity as well as Judaism; for while Christianity is not quite the same as Judaism, it is based, like rabbinic Judaism, on the great tradition of Jerusalem, in relation to which Christianity is what the Jews would call a 'midrash', an interpretation and elaboration.

"*I'm here and I like you a lot and it can work and try not to hurt one another too much.*" Let me take each one of the four parts of this wonderful sentence and say just enough about it to show how, together, the four parts represent the most significant things that should be said about what Christianity is.

*First, I'm here.* This is about the *presence* of God. Without the sense of the divine presence belief in God would be empty and abstract. The being-here of God is the presupposition of faith, and of worship. Christianity is not really interested in proving the 'existence' of God; it's far bolder: it wants us to feel the *presence* of God, and to know that our lives are lived in that presence. *Coram Deo* said Luther: we live and die and love and think and talk and worship and write books and sing songs *before God*. That's who we are.

When the George Burns God of this story makes this the first point of his 'message' he is hitting the contextual nail straight on the head; because precisely the sense of God's presence is what contemporary secular life lacks—the transcendent, the holy. Some twenty-odd years ago, my denomination (The United Church of Canada) put together a contemporary creed; and for once we got it right. The Creed begins with the declaration, "We are not alone, we live in God's world . . . ." That was the right beginning because creeds should always take on the very disbelief that plagues a people, and what we all fear today, whatever we may say about it, is precisely that we *are alone*; that there is nothing there beyond our wishful thinking, no guarantee of meaning, no third dimension, eternity, no God. So the first thing the Christian has to confess is that, to the contrary, he or she has felt—in at least some rudimentary way--God's presence: "I'm here".

For Christians this 'here-ness' of God assumes a quite concrete form. In Jesus, God's presence is bound up with the historical presence of one like ourselves—one who is born, who suffers, who loves, who dies. Not merely a spirit, but flesh and blood. In him we encounter the specificity of God; he is Emmanuel, God with us. You are not alone. ***I'm here. And I will be here no matter what happens to you.***

*Second, I like you a lot.* Isn't that good! I suppose Avery Corman could have had the George Burns God say, "I love you". That would be more conventional. But somehow it wouldn't fit the metaphor, would it. I wonder if it would even tell us what we need to know—that God, the Source of life, the life-giving Spirit, the great Mystery before whom we live: that God is not only 'with us' but also '*for us*'. I wonder if the word 'love' would do that for us today. It's become such a predictable thing! Unlike our less chatty and demonstrative forebears, we bandy the word 'love' about so easily today. Every phone conversation has to end with a "love you".

Sometimes I think that if you really wanted to tell somebody you loved them you'd have to find other words and ways of doing it! "I like you a lot" sounds ordinary, but how many times has it been said to you recently? When did you last say it to someone else? When it's meant, it means a lot more than a cheery 'love yuh, bye'

Anyway this has to be at least second on the list of what Christianity absolutely must mean: the first thing remains first, God is here, not far off, up-there, out-there but right here—God is *with* us, with *us!* But by itself even that can be a bit inconclusive, because it begs the question, "So who *is* this God who is with us—what's His or Her or Its attitude toward us?" What does God think of us, of our world, of our species? That's not an incidental question, especially at a time when (as a species) we don't think much of *ourselves*, it's of the essence of the religious quest. So when Avery Corman has God telling the grocery-clerk or would-be writer, "I like you a lot—you and your kind,"—Corman is being a very good Jewish-Christian theologian. For the biblical God is not only *with* us; the God of the older and newer Testaments is even more importantly *for us*—another favourite Reformation idea: God is *pro nobis*.

*Third*—and here's the really subtle part!—*it can work*. What an amazing declaration that is! It can work. What? What can work? Why, the *creation*, of course; the world; life; the life of finite, limited, imperfect, mortal creatures like us! It isn't random. Nature isn't capricious. It follows, *usually*, the rules. Spring follows winter. The sun rises with great regularity. The force of gravity can be depended upon most days. Try jumping off the Empire State Building if you don't think so. Today at least, because certain laws of chemistry don't work only on Tuesdays, most babies survive infancy, and many people live to be ninety or more. If you are modest and respectful of others and work reasonably hard, you will likely be able to make a living. And if you have any regard for the world yourself you will be able to help others—maybe millions of others, if you do it together—make a living.

Because you aren't up against an absurd and meaningless universe, however mixed up or indifferent it undoubtedly seems to you sometimes; you "live in God's world", and in God's world, for all the chaos of it (most of which we create ourselves), there is a modicum of order on which we can usually depend. It's true that *purpose* doesn't just stare you in the face, you have to think about it, agonize over it, discover it, lose it, and discover it

again. But it's there to be discovered, by each of us in his or her own stumbling way, because God didn't create the world as a divine plaything or a prank or a bad joke; God created it for the beauty, order, goodness and truth that it can and often does manifest. Imagine!—there is something and not nothing! And it's such a beautiful something, whether seen from the moon (as we've seen it in our time) or seen from the cradle of a little child. ***It can work.***

**So** (because already here the 'message' begins to be an ethic!) try to help it work and even flourish as it can and should, you human creatures. Because part of the reason why 'it can work' is that you, my dear *homo sapiens sapiens*, have the capacity to help the process along! Not only don't you have to wreck the place, as you seem bent on doing just now, you can actually contribute to its wonderful potentiality for fulfilment. Because you are stewards of the whole enterprise—not owners, as you're so often tempted to think, but not helpless pawns either. You are accountable for the way you act in this beautiful, fallen garden; but you are also capable of keeping it from falling further into wilderness and helping it to become the "very good" creation that God pronounced it from the beginning. *It can work.* This too is of the essence of our faith, and there is probably no part of this message we are more in need of hearing today.

Finally, the explicitly ethical dimension of this faith: ***try not to hurt one another too much.*** I don't know about you, but I find this a delightful way of summarizing the spirit of biblical moral teaching. It's not exaggerated—it doesn't indulge in ethical ideals and programs that have never worked anyway, and only end by making us all feel guilty because we can't attain them. Of course it assumes all the really major thou-shalt-nots, murder and theft and irresponsible sex and lying and so forth. But it doesn't assume that any of us is going to be perfect. It doesn't construct such a lofty blueprint of the good life—a sort of heavenly 'American Dream,'—that anybody actually following it would never have to seek forgiveness! No, it assumes that there will be mistakes, wrong turnings, bad things happening to good people. It assumes that when people try to live together there will be personality clashes, and jealousy, and one-upmanship, and that sort of thing. It knows that when you single out one person to be loved uniquely, you are eliminating several others from candidacy for your most intimate affections. It knows that not every child is going to be a genius, and that some will be more agile, more fit, more attractive physically than others. The Christian ethic, however insistent it may be that we ought to strive for the best, is

based on an ontology—a theology—that understands our weakness and ‘remembers that we are dust.’ None of us, even the best and the brightest, can afford to point fingers at anyone else; because if we really are wise enough to have self-knowledge we will know, deeply, how fragile is our own ‘righteousness’, our own authenticity. At the end of the day, none—not one!—will escape the need for repentance, reconciliation, forgiveness. “If we say that we are without sin,” writes the author of John’s first epistle, “we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sin God is faithful and just to forgive us . . . .”—well, you know all that.

So I like very much the essential modesty and realism of this way the George Burns God-figure sums up the divine commandments: **“try not to hurt one another too much.”**

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*I’m here. . . . and I like you a lot . . . and it can work . . . and try not to hurt one another too much.*

*Of course* there is much more to be said. I’ve spent a lifetime trying to say it!—and there’s still a lot unsaid! But we need to remind ourselves, in the midst of faith’s complexities—and life’s complexities—of the most *essential* claims of our tradition. Avery Corman’s sentence captures these, I think, in an extraordinary way. So long as we keep to such a compassionate credo as this, we’ll be able to find our way through the ambiguities and challenges of our difficult and much-threatened period of history.

Amen.