

Sermon at Trinity Church – July 21, 2019 – Lilian Revel

“Ask a Question Series”

In the name of our loving God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

The questioner wrote: Some Christians seem to believe differently than others and I'd like to know how some of these changes came about.

I should like to begin with a slight detour through mysticism. Karl Rahner, one of the most renowned Christian theologians of the twentieth century once remarked that “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” Now, this is a very strong statement and many of you may not agree with it.

However, Christianity is based on the teachings of Jesus, a through and through mystic of his time. What Jesus taught was a way of life in which we seek true God experiences; heart-felt intimacy with God, our neighbor and ourselves; and a spirituality centered on a miraculous and joyful appreciation of the Spirit's ability to heal and transform lives. Jesus' teachings were not based on legalistic religion, patriarchal morality, obedience of laws and rules, defining who is in and who is out. Those are actually the things of the Jewish religion he was against, at

least the rigidity of them. I personally don't believe Jesus ever intended that a church be established in his name. He simply brought us a different way for leading a meaningful joyful life centered on love. And with it he brought us a new concept of God.

Although Christian mysticism has existed since the beginning of our church, and still exists, for a variety of historical, social, and political reasons it moved to the margins of the church while the institution grew from its original form of small house churches to a much larger organization, which was eventually recognized as the official church of the Roman Empire when Constantine I came to power in the beginning of the 4th century. Though the church may be inspired by God, it is nevertheless a man-made institution, and as such it undergoes constant transformations. It is not a static entity. As it grew and took form it established norms, rules, mission statements, dogmas, hierarchies of power, and of course it watched out over the theologies it endorsed. Many books have been written about the early history of the church, but we only have time for skipping around a bit. Suffice it to say that new theological and liturgical ideas were constantly being discussed, and either accepted or rejected; sometimes changes were necessary to respond to new theological insights, different cultural settings, new political scenes, new scientific breakthroughs, etc. and in the process some people were

excommunicated, persecuted, and occasionally even executed. It is also important to note that the political and ecclesiastical powers were very much entwined, with the political powers usually being the dominant ones.

There were many squabbles about hundreds of different topics, but none ended in major divisions, that is until the Great Schism of 1054, when the eastern churches separated from the western churches to become the Orthodox Church in the east and the Roman Catholic Church in the west. This division occurred because of differences in theology and in practices. The separation remains until today, although in 1962 the two churches began talking to each other and recognizing each other's sacraments. Much healing still needs to be done.

Skipping right over the next half a millennium we come to the 16th century in Western Europe. During this time a new intellectual movement arose, known as humanism. It involved a recovery of the classical world of Greece and Rome, its art and learning. The recovery of ancient texts and the recovery of languages long forgotten in the Latin West inspired a new perspective. The greatest of the religious humanists was Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536). Through his knowledge of Greek, he rediscovered many church writers who had been lost for centuries. Perhaps his greatest achievement was the publication of the Greek text of the New Testament in 1516, which was only known in its Latin version (the Vulgata).

Into this scene stepped Martin Luther (1483-1546), an Augustinian monk, later priest. He too wanted to go back to the basics of studying the Bible and through his studies of the Gospels and the letters of St. Paul he came upon a new and revolutionary way of understanding God's grace. His famous quote is: humans are saved from their sins by God's grace alone, through faith alone on the basis of Scripture alone (*Sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura*). In addition he found himself at odds with many practices of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly the sale of indulgences that supposedly would buy freedom from purgatory, while all the money flowed to Rome for the building of the new Basilica of St. Peter. Luther managed to distill 95 points, or theses, on which he disagreed with the church. In October of 1517, Luther changed the course of human history when he nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the castle church at Wittenberg, accusing the Roman Catholic Church of heresy upon heresy. Many people cite this act as the primary starting point of the Protestant Reformation. (I recently travelled to Wittenberg and have a photo of the famous door with the engraved 95 theses. See me after the service.)

Luther's action of course didn't immediately cause a separation from the church. A lot of political drama accompanied by tremendous acts of violence which ended in a war followed this initial step. Luther himself was

excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church in 1521. He then went into hiding for a year during which he translated the Old Testament into German. (He had already translated the New Testament earlier.) By 1530 the Lutheran Reformation had triumphed in Germany and eventually in Scandinavia as well, and it became known as the Protestant church.

We are so lucky here in our part of the world and in our time that we have the freedom to choose what we believe, and where and how we worship. That was not at all true back in the Middle Ages nor is it everywhere in the world now. People back then had to follow the religion of the ruler of their territory. Although there were plenty of folks wanting to follow Luther the deciding factor was always the ruler as expressed in the phrase *cuius regio, eius religio* (“he who governs the territory decides its religion”), which meant that each ruler in the empire—i.e., each prince or city government—could opt for either the Roman Catholic or the [Lutheran](#) religion and that this choice was binding on everyone under that ruler’s jurisdiction. [Calvinism](#), Zwinglianism, and Anabaptism were excluded.

These three forms of Christianity advanced at almost the same time as Lutheranism did and eventually they were recognized and prevailed in other geographic regions. They also relied on the Bible as their source of truth. They all wanted to go back to the very early forms of Christianity, including mysticism.

They believed to differing degrees that baptism was to be performed only for adults who had been able to confess their sins. They also rejected icons and proceeded to remove all of these from their places of worship. The most important difference was their discussion on the nature of the Eucharist; was it consubstantiation, transubstantiation, or a spiritual symbolic act, etc. This is what eventually separated them from the Lutheran Protestants.

The final Reformation movement in Europe was unlike the others and happened in England. It was rooted in political concerns. King Henry VIII needed a male successor and his wife Catherine of Aragon had only been able to provide one surviving child, a daughter. Henry wanted to marry Anne Boleyn but couldn't obtain an annulment from the church in Rome. So he put himself in control of the church of England and in 1534 the break was complete. He divorced Catherine and married Anne Boleyn. Since then the King/Queen of England is the head of the English or Anglican Church. For the most part the church retained the beliefs and worship forms of the Roman Catholic Church.

By 1540 the unity of Western Christendom had become shattered. And we have only skimmed the surface of this history. Then came the conquest of the new continent, America, which brought with it a whole new set of variations on Christianity, to be studied another day.

To summarize our findings, as we have seen, changes and divisions get initiated by a number of factors:

- New theological insights
- Protests against power structures
- Protests against corruption
- Liturgical practices
- Changes in political, social and cultural climate
- A wish to go back to basics, such as the Bible

They then turn into reality through:

- Popular demand
- Hierarchical power
- Freedom of choice
- New forms of governance
- Sometimes through force

How are these various forms of Christianity different?

- Some take the bible very literally
- Others take the bible more metaphorically
- Some believe in God as a separate being
- For others God is always within

- Some don't accept the saints
- Some have different ways of explaining the Eucharist
- Some believe Jesus is God
- Others may see him as rabbi, prophet, healer, mystic
- For some heaven and hell are real places
- While others believe they are attitudes of the self
- The belief of predestination plays a role for some people.

Throughout these transformations or alongside these transformations a mystical movement has always existed, unperturbed by the culture of the times. I find this the most promising factor for a unified future. Mysticism exists in all forms of religion and its basis is the same: find God in yourself and in others. Follow your true desires and all will be well. Maybe Karl Rahner was right: we will all be mystics.

AMEN.