

OS DESAFIOS DA CONTEMPORANEIDADE A O CRISTIANISMO

Views on the Contemporary Challenges to Christianity

Fernando Caldeira da Silva
University of South Africa
fcdasilva@gmail.com

Resumo

O cristianismo é desafiado por várias tendências contemporâneas, quer internas quer externas, que este artigo estuda. Internamente, o cristianismo está a ser desafiado a alterar os símbolos religiosos utilizados na devoção individual e no culto coletivo. Contudo, transformações culturais ou os problemas ecológicos (para utilizar dois exemplos), exercem uma enorme pressão no cristianismo, incitando-o a repensar a sua posição relativamente a desafios externos. Uma questão radical está a ser colocada às Igrejas Cristãs, líderes e membros, relacionada com o tipo de posição moral que os cristãos devem adotar de forma a encarar os problemas e males do mundo, como a guerra, a população deslocada, a fome, as secas e a corrupção. Este artigo analisa a pressão contemporânea interna e externa colocadas perante o cristianismo.

Palavras-Chave: Cristianismo contemporâneo, desafios, ética, moral, consciência.

Abstract

Christianity is challenged by various internal as well as external contemporary trends which this article studies. Internally, Christianity is being challenged to change the religious symbols used in individual devotion and collective worship. However, cultural transformation as well as ecological problems (to use two examples) place enormous pressure on Christianity urging Christianity to rethink its stance regarding external challenges. A radical question is being posed to Christian Churches, leaders and members, which is related to the type of moral position Christians should take in order to address the problems and evils of the world like war, population displacement, famine, drought, and corruption. This article addresses contemporary internal pressure as well as external challenges posed to Christianity.

Key words: Contemporary Christianity, challenges, ethics, moral, conscience.

Introduction

Initially, it is important to begin by addressing the meaning of contemporary Christianity because it is the focus of this article. During the last century, the trend in Western ‘Christian’ society was not that of a “the denial of God”, as Robins (1913:449) asserts, but a “fading of a vivid sense of Him”, Robins (1913:449). Yet, while there are those who have difficulty to consider God as a Person to whom they can pray, “many are returning with renewed confidence to the Christian idea of God as the Father of our spirits, a frankly non-philosophical, ethical conception”, Robins (1913:449). According to the anecdotal view by Crosby (nd:1), “Contemporary Christianity is the constant modification of New Testament religion to attract the unregenerate and carnal Christians, please the flesh, and be relatively acceptable to the world”.

Livingstone (2000:2) states that the “Two great opponents of Christian values and spirituality that face us today – [are] two impulses that militate against Christian tradition. I am calling these the *secular syndrome* [my emphasis] and the *idolatry impulse* [my emphasis]”. In other words, what Livingstone (2000:2) points out is that there are two aspects to contemporary tendencies which challenge Christianity, one internal and the other external. The pressure is upon Christianity to adopt new theological interpretations; yet, that will lead to a modification of church life experiences affecting collective worship as well as Christian personal devotion. While internal ecclesiastical contemporary trends are challenging the essence of Christianity, external challenges are posed by a radical question related to the needs of the world which require ethics, morals and conscience. The response Christianity gives to the needs and problems of the world is relevant in areas such as the alleviation of poverty and the provision for basic needs. In addition, Christianity also provides leadership towards the moderation and resolution of conflicting situations. However, as Budiselić (2014:399) puts it, “Christianity is a religion of witness, and in our contemporary world Christian witness is faced with secularist and postmodernist societies that do not accept religious claims as valid and normative”. Therefore, this article addresses the above-mentioned challenges, both internal and external as sources of pressure that challenge Christianity.

1. Internal Ecclesiastical Challenges to Contemporary Christianity

Christianity is changing globally as indicated by the various modern trends such as profound alterations in church worship as well as in individual Christian ethos and lifestyle. These trends are no longer localised to a particular region or country; rather, as Wachege (2012:12) states, “The trends have a universal geographical spread”. In addition, Wachege (2012:12) points out that apart from the various causes that spark these tendencies,

Each continent...selects and accentuates the self-same Christian Doctrinal themes according to the historical needs, situations in life and living, aspirations and critical awareness of its own people with the disposition towards others from other regions for mutual enrichment and solidarity.

According to Wachege (2012:14), among the tendencies of modern-day global Christianity we encounter the adoption of theological thoughts “inspired in blessings and blessing, curses and cursing”. Christianity also depicts types of ecclesiology “based on the model of the Church viewed as the people of God/family of God”, Wachege (2012:14). At times, there are in Christianity theological mysticisms infused “with sin as a critical moral item” (Wachege, 2012:14). Additionally, there are inclinations towards overemphasising “marriage issues” (Wachege, 2012:14) that are not aligned to the *Word of God* as well as Christian movements drifting towards the “feminist...[and] women liberation theologies” (Wachege, 2012:14). He adds, that another trend found within contemporary Christianity is an overemphasis on the subject of “demonology” (Wachege, 2012:14). There are also problems found in Christianity related to Christian ethics and behaviour, “grace and conversion” (Wachege, 2012:14), as well as the need for ethical decisions regarding ‘abortion’ and “euthanasia” (Wachege, 2012:14). These Christian tendencies include the alteration of worship symbols such as the use of musical instruments such as drum sets and guitars instead of the traditional use of the piano or the organ or technology to project the songs in the service instead of the use of the traditional hymn book including dancing in church. Consequently, collective services may now include a mix of worldly cultural trends with traditional Christian worship elements. As Jones (nd:[3]) points out

It is axiomatic that our methodology in worship reflects our theology. Further, our methodology often defines our *raison d’etre* for gathering corporately to pursue worship. What is not explicitly stated regarding a church’s purpose in corporate worship is revealed implicitly in the forms it chooses in its pursuit of worship.

Jones (nd:[3]) adds,

In churches in which the congregation's "felt needs" are the primary determinate in choosing the means of worship, one finds an anthropocentric approach toward worship rather than a theocentric approach. Consequently, *ipso facto*, God is not receiving all due honour, glory and devotion, which should be the preeminent concern while engaging in worship. Anthropocentric inclinations are often an indication of deficiencies regarding the church's pursuit and practice of theological truth. In other words, worship which is man-centred reflects a poor or ill-defined understanding of who God is.

In the process described above, Christian collective worship symbols are conforming to new worldly cultural trends which pose the problem of creating a mix thus altering the true essence of Biblical worship. With regard to mixing worldly culture with the Christian collective worship such mix poses internal theological and practical challenges as religious symbols tend to shift with it. DaSilva (2006:84) points out that "If the religious symbols change [in the church] the religious body structure [becomes distressed] and departure is then [a possibility]" which could lead to further division and fragmentation in the Church. In addition, DaSilva (2006:86) states that "The change of paradigms of the religious symbols into new rituals and ceremonials [as well as the changes of] feelings of reverence and fear...[bring] about [distress in Christianity]". New theological interpretations lead to a modification of church life experiences affecting also Christian personal devotion. In essence, what really is changing in global Christianity is its religious symbols, the importance of which, in collective Christian worship is explained by Giddens (nd:522-523),

Religions imply a conjunct of symbols, which call for feelings of reverence and fear, connected to rituals or ceremonials (like religious services), realized by a community of believers... The existence of collective ceremonials is usually seen by sociologists as one of the factors that distinguish religion from magic.

Additionally, the traditional religious symbols which are more profound than the previously discussed worship symbols of a particular Christian community these are constantly challenged by continued new trends of worldly cultural effects that produce alterations and drifts in Christian collective worship. Members of Christian communities are simultaneously members of society which means they are subjected to continued social pressure towards cultural change. Consequently, Senkbeil (2014:292) is of the opinion "that we are going to have to first step away from our culture if we are to truly embrace it and connect it to Christ and his word". A few decades ago it seemed Christianity was fading away; however, this is not the case now as Pentecostal and Charismatic numbers are increasing exponentially and has reached in the last decades over half a billion believers

which currently stands at 25% of Christian membership in the world (Smith, 2011:1). According to Cortez (2014:1),

There were 631 million Pentecostals in 2014 comprising nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ of all Christians. There were only 63 million Pentecostals in 1970, and the number is expected to reach 800 million by 2025.

While Western civilization is rapidly changing, Christianity seems to be reshaping itself to be able to cope with the challenges which in turn will alter the course of the world and the future of Western civilization. In this regard, Walsh (1950:9-10) claims,

Most of the advanced thinkers point out...that the impact of Christianity has been on the decline for the past several centuries... Perhaps the present sad state of Western civilization arises largely from the watering-down and outright rejection of Christianity. In that case, a return to Christianity may be the price a reluctant world will have to pay if it wants any civilization at all.

The above-mentioned changes in Christianity are permeating all denominations including traditional Churches as common projects are shared by diverse denominations. An example of this permeation is the spread of the ‘Alpha Course’ which is an evangelistic tool aimed at explaining the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith through a series of talks and discussions in which the organizers attempt to explain the Christian meaning of life. According to anecdotal evidence by Bell (2013) “[The Anglican] Holy Trinity Church in West Bromwich, London...is the birthplace of [the] Alpha [Course]”. In South Africa, however, Roman Catholics are using the Alpha Course as indicated by a pamphlet which advertises the ‘Alpha Course’ entitled “The Alpha Course – Answering a call to Catholic Evangelization”, which is promoted by Alpha SA, Alpha for Catholics, (Alpha brochure 2008 tabloid, 2011).

The tendency in Christianity is for crosspollination including new common ideas and international projects in a generous spirit. Yet, Christianity is faced with serious internal challenges as discussed above and externally there is the radical question for Christianity today and the future which implies ethics, morals, and conscience as discussed next.

2. External Contemporary Challenges to Christianity

The radical question that Christianity faces today is posed by what the world needs and expects from religions. This expectation is based on the assumption “That religion is meant to participate in the healing of the world” as Reid and Trice (2015:19) claim. The

everyday changing world constantly creates needs and expectations but also expresses frustration towards religious organizations and Christians as well as members of other religions. The following are examples of what is happening in the world involving “religion or its aliases” as Sinn and Trice (2015:19) indicate:

Kidnappings of Church of the Brethren teenage girls in Nigeria; the murder of Israeli and Palestinian children in a blood revenge and the further escalation to inter-ethnic and inter-national conflict; the rapid rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); a twenty-first-century refugee crisis for millions; the continued fight for rights by minority religious groups such as Ahmadiyah Muslims and Batak Protestant Christians in Indonesia; and the persistence of “Bible-based” white xenophobic Christianity in quarters of the USA.

The socio-historical reality of the current situation globally, includes the misuse of the principles of the Christian faith (as well as those of other faiths) as cyphers and elements to disseminating “or reinforcing conflict” (Sinn & Trice, 2015:19). Members of the three Abrahamic monotheistic faiths continue to nurture “cyphers” of discord which constitute a serious challenge to the outlook of the true values, ethos and meaning of Christianity, which Sinn and Trice (2015:20) corroborate,

Practitioners and activists from all three Abrahamic faiths have more access to one another than at any time in modern history. Still, the serious challenge we face as co-religionists is that the bad news is so horrendously bad, even anathema, to the spirit of religion itself.

It is incumbent upon Christianity to find answers to the world’s problems because of Biblical exhortations such as “love thy neighbour” (*Mark* 12:31), which underpins ethical behaviour. The process to find those answers requires the identification of the patterns of hunger and need and then finding out what “nutrient is missing” (Sinn & Trice, 2015:20).

The Christian remedy for the evils of the world may come for instance as the provision of peace for populations that are in conflict. Consequently, Sinn and Trice (2015:20) argue that “If so, then our radical question for our age is, how will religion [Christianity in particular] and its adherents become relevant instruments of peace in the twenty-first century? This question of religious relevance for peace is certainly essential for us”. Even if peace is one of the greatest needs of our world, Sinn and Trice (2015:20) assert “That there is a more immediate nutrient for us that we undervalue, and that we can nevertheless together locate in our faiths as a *spirit of generosity* [my emphasis]”.

The world challenges Christianity (as well as the other Abrahamic faiths) to benefit from the “Spirit of generosity that Jews, Muslims and Christians share from the heart of their

communities, which is critical to humanity and the world in the twenty-first century” (Sinn & Trice, 2015:20). Wars, famine and droughts cause pain and need; however, they can also cause profound positive change in society. Kastfelt (2005:12) indicates that,

Civil wars, like other wars, are not only about destruction. They are also sources of innovation and creativity. Scarcity, poverty and the lack of material goods often facilitate technological innovations, but civil wars may also produce important religious innovations. The same is the case with other forms of extreme social situations such as famine and drought.

How Christianity responds to the challenges posed by the world determines and shapes its present-day features as well as its future. In the case of war Christian Churches are called to serve as mediators, peacemakers and arbiters Kastfelt (2005:95). An interesting observation about the social role of Churches is discussed below,

A final social role that churches have played in Rwanda and Burundi is as arbiters in conflict. This function of referee settling disputes between divided parties is one that church people across the ideological spectrum can support. Those linked to the regime do not feel their relationship with political authorities threatened by such a role, while makes the church relevant to the population, (Kastfelt, 2005:12).

The above quotation implies that Churches and Christians are relevant social partners in dramatic situations such as war, famine and drought. In this case, Christians use care agencies such as the Roman Catholic Caritas Internationalis (Internationalis, nd) to alleviate poverty, or, the Global Teen Challenge (Challenge, 2017) to address the issue of drug addiction and its related social problems which is supported by Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches in many countries of the world. These are just two examples of how Christianity is characterised by divine love, compassion, and generosity; it reflects the nature of God Who expressed such generosity in His initial act of creation mentioned in *Genesis* 1:1, evident in the following quotation,

That initial divine act of creation is first and foremost a supreme act of generosity toward human beings and the world, whereby creation itself—as the divine calling-to-order of things out of nothing—is the *primum movens*, or first act of the self-giving God to creation itself (Sinn & Trice, 2015:22).

Christianity is therefore challenged by the needs of the world which requires the demonstration of compassion as well as loving generosity. However, the need for the formation of conscience as well as the consequent moral development are also challenges posed by the world to Christianity.

Christianity is supposed to be a source for applied morals which requires the active intervention of conscience. The formation of a Christian conscience both at individual and collective levels is the objective of the devotional life and the Biblical teachings which Churches actively promote. The world needs practical ways to find a solution for its social problems which require ethical action as well as high degrees of active conscience levels. Some of the needs of the world are mentioned by Singer,

The treatment of ethnic minorities, equality for women, the use of animals for food and research, the preservation of the natural environment, abortion, euthanasia, and the obligation of the wealthy to help the poor [for instance], (Singer, 1999:1).

Singer (1999:4) adds that there is a link between religion and ethics which Christianity is determined to spread. Although Christian ethics may be seen as subjective, the evils of the world require objective reasonable answers. Reason is called into play for ethical decisions according to the Biblical norms which are active in Christian conscience. This is why Singer (1999:8) is of the opinion that

This issue of the role that reason can play in ethics is the crucial point raised by the claim that ethics is subjective. The non-existence of a mysterious realm of objective ethical facts does not imply the non-existence of ethical reasoning. It may even help, since if we could arrive at ethical judgments only by intuiting these strange ethical facts, ethical argument would be more difficult still. So, what has to be shown to put practical ethics on a sound basis is that ethical reasoning is possible...in ethics.

Consequently, Christianity is called upon to provide individuals and communities with sound mental guidelines which offer Church members and society the norms for conscience to operate, “to make a moral judgment, or to argue about an ethical issue, or to live according to ethical standards” (Singer, 1999:9). Spohn (2000:12) describes conscience as

That still small voice that makes you feel smaller still... Conscience is not a separate faculty of the mind. It is a human process of assessment and judgment and not the authoritative voice of God. Vatican II correctly notes that “their conscience is people’s most secret core, and their sanctuary. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths.

In addition, human conscience is shaped by God’s voice which needs to be taught from a Biblical perspective. Spohn (2000:123) explains that

God's voice may add resonance to our deepest reflections but it does not bypass them with direct dictation. Conscience is not merely a social construction... This moral knowledge is self-reflexive and socially connected, knowing that is accountable to my deepest self, to human communities, and ultimately to God.

The world expects Christian believers to be taught in Church how to acquire the ability to properly determine between what is right or wrong as well as to learn how to apply conscience in "a practical *process*" (Spohn, 2000:124). The next stage Christians are expected to be taught is in the processing of thoughts following the conscience guidelines towards the *judgements*, which are explained as the "wholehearted decisions of conscience when we achieve a fully congruent, reflective equilibrium of reason, intuition, and emotion" (Spohn, 2000:125). Christianity is challenged to depict

The ordinary practices of Christian spirituality [which] provide means of moral formation that will not be found in philosophical virtue ethics... Christian spirituality...has developed a whole series of practices that are meant to help individuals and communities develop in a particular way of life, (Spohn, 2000:138).

The importance of Biblical teachings in the formation of a Christian conscience is illustrated in the quotation below,

When Martin Luther stood before the Diet of Worms and was asked to recant, he declared before the watching world, 'I cannot recant. My conscience is held captive by the Word of God. And to act against conscience is neither right nor safe.' Understanding the role of the conscience and its relation to the law of God is extremely important", (Spoul, 2012:27).

The world challenges Christianity to provide the normative guidelines for conscience for individuals and communities as well as to provide people that experience and are to be practical moral examples of ethical behaviour such as late Mother Theresa of Calcutta. This is corroborated by Annamma (2014:52),

There is only one simple truth that she [Mother Teresa] wanted to communicate through her word and deed: God is our loving Father and therefore, we, his children must love one another in all the concreteness of that word. Her mission consisted in intensely loving and caring for the poorest of the poor. She had a special predilection for the least and the lost.

These exemplary Christian believers may be required to contribute with sound leadership for society and even as to get involved as peacemakers when conflicting situations arise. The base for the operations of a Christian conscience are intrinsically Biblical and they are described as linked to "righteousness" (*Job 27:6*) as well as based on

“the secret thoughts” (*Romans* 2:14-16) of which the Apostle Paul used the Greek word *syneidesis*, literally translated as *conscience* (*Christian Conscience in Healthcare*, 2012:4). A serious problem is identified in Christianity when there are believers who seem to be committed to practicing the Gospels’ ethical principles but they do not agree with Christian ethos, values and significance in their hearts. Vincenzo Pinto of the AFP recently reported, while in Guidonia on the outskirts of Rome (Italy), “Pope Francis admitted on Sunday [January 15, 2017] to sometimes having ‘darkness’ cloud on his own faith, while warning against ‘Christian parrots’ who pay lip service to the church without acting on its values” (Pinto, 2017:1).

In addition, Bianchi (1998:67) points out that there is also an ecological challenge to Christianity as populations tend to increase and nature is stressed to produce resources. The world is increasingly concerned with planetary issues related to technological advances which result in pollution of land, water, and air, deforestation, and the consequent global heating. As a result, Bianchi (1998:67) states that the ecological ethical question posed to Christianity is: “In this evolving scenario of ecological degradation what is the role of religion in general and of Christianity in particular?” The traditional problem of Christianity is that its doctrines tend to be “anthropocentric and otherworldly” (Bianchi, 1998:68); that is, “[In] the realm of doctrine Christianity does not lend itself easily to becoming a nature spirituality” (Bianchi, 1998:68).

Throughout Christian history theologians have been concerned with the transcendence of God and almost ignored His immanence in nature. However, God’s command to Adam as recorded in *Genesis* 2:15 is, “Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it” (*Bible – New King James Version*, 1992). This command may be interpreted as vesting human beings with the need for responsible behaviour with regard to nature. Church History explains that Christianity tended to avoid an eco-theology as a reaction to the doctrines related to nature of the heretic Gnosticism and Manicheism. Bianchi (1998:68) states,

Early Christian thinkers tried to defend against the extreme dualisms of Gnosticism and Manicheism, but Augustine’s heritage of dualistic thinking (City of God/City of man, the depravity of the sexual body and human will over against God’s grace) profoundly influenced subsequent Christian history. Even the famous Catholic doctrine of grace building on nature was about human nature, not about the nature of rivers, birds, and mountains.

Therefore, there has been a constant tendency for Christian theologians to avoid the subject of eco-theology. Yet, the need for answers to the environmental problems on a global

scale challenge the Christian traditional “Ecology-resistant dimensions of Christian teachings” (Bianchi, 1998:68). Christianity is no longer capable of ignoring evils that affect the entire human race causing traumatic experiences and fears;

The ecological challenge underlies most of the major world traumas: war, poverty, famine, overpopulation, the destruction of species, and many others. Christianity, in dialogue with other wisdom traditions, can contribute significant spiritual resources for ecological awareness and inspiration. This great mission will require joint efforts from the world’s religions (Bianchi, 1998:79).

A recommendation for Christian believers is that they consider *Romans* 8:18-22,

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us.¹⁹ **For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God** [my emphasis].²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope;²¹ because the **creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God** [my emphasis].²² For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now. (*The Holy Bible – New King James Version*).

The ecological challenge to Christianity is inevitable and requires a theological approach that will change thought and behaviour. In addition, there is also the impact of technology, media and the Internet on church life. Within the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches young people no longer bring their *Bibles* to the service; instead, they use *Bible Applications* on their cell phones or tablets. Immediately the preacher makes a Biblical reference or a theological statement, youth (as well as adults) quickly search for meaning on the Internet resulting in a quick formation of an opinion that may not be based on the *Bible*. This results in ethics becoming an entirely personal choice which excludes traditional Church norms based on Biblical ecclesiology. Schwarz (1979:205) explains;

For many years, technological progress was perceived as intrinsically good and necessary. Yet more and more people begin to question whether technology and the notion of progress can actually be called good. Some people even wish to do away with the idea of progress altogether and return to a lifestyle of simplicity... Since humanity in its fullest sense can be viewed only in the horizon of eschatological perfection provided by Judeo-Christian tradition, good or evil is that which furthers or hinders the realization of the kingdom of God. Technology can then even be an expression of our attempt to respond to the promise of God’s kingdom.

Another area which competes with church life is Christian Television that offers broadcast programs and tends to substitute Church services. This poses the problem of believers lacking Biblical communion and brotherly fellowship. In addition, secular

television also confronts consciences and challenges Christianity. In Ignatieff's (1985:57) opinion;

Television confronts consciences of the West with suffering in the Third World. Through its news broadcasts and spectacles like 'Live Aid', television has become the privileged medium through which moral relations between strangers are mediated in the modern world. Yet, the effects of televisual images and the rules and conventions of electronic news-gathering on such moral relations are rarely examined.

The traditional barriers of moral divide raised by race, religion, geography and citizenship are being destroyed by television as well as by the media in general which also challenges Christianity (Ignatieff, 1985:59).

Conclusion

This article began with a discussion of the internal as well as the external challenges posed to global Christianity. However, the intention was to outline some of the issues which Christianity is faced with and that ought to be addressed as well as to provoke thought. Instead of being concerned mostly with the salvation and the eternal destiny of human beings, Christianity is now challenged to provide solutions for social as well as political problems that affect the entire world. These problems include war, famine, and displaced populations, but also global difficulties related to ecology and the environment. Consequently, the recommendation is that Christian leaders ought to engage deeply in the process to find solutions to the evils that prevail in the world.

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