

THE ISSUE IS PERCEPTION

by Paul M. Cox, Ph.D.

MODERN PERCEPTIONS

Whatever the “truth” may be, most people will never know it apart from their own perception of what the truth is. Moreover, many people only need a small amount of information or a limited experience to gain a perception. Unfortunately, a perception in the mind is interpreted as a universal truth. For example, there is a general perception in our country that the Japanese manufacture a higher quality automobile than those manufactured by American auto makers. Thus, if you should have a problem with a Japanese car, you have been unlucky. Conversely, if you have had few problems with an American car, you have been lucky. In this article I would like to state five perceptions I think most people generally have about Christianity and describe the historical roots of these perceptions.

- ❖ Perception #1: Christianity is irrational and the claims of Christianity cannot be rationally defended.
- ❖ Perception #2: Only emotional or psychological cripples need Christianity.
- ❖ Perception #3: Religious people, especially Evangelical Christians, are strange and inhibited.
- ❖ Perception #4: Christian leaders are charlatans and live off of emotionally weak-minded people.
- ❖ Perception #5: Adherents of Christianity want to impose their values and rules upon others.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Renaissance

A significant shift in Western culture began in a period called the Renaissance. “Renaissance” is a term which historians use to apply to the broad cultural change which came over Western Europe in the early fourteenth century. The term “Renaissance” means rebirth. The idea of rebirth was used to describe the revival of the values of classical Greek and Roman civilization as it pertained to the arts, politics, and general approach to life. During the Renaissance a subtle alteration began to occur, a shift away from theology to anthropology. In light of this shift, the Renaissance raised premature questions which believing Christians were unable to answer, e.g., “How does a believing Christian deal with their natural, human impulses?” The Renaissance was an intoxicating phase of humanism the celebration of art, morals, thought and life on an eminently human scale. In the Renaissance, we have a move away from God and the transcendent toward the human and the “here and now.” However, just as the Renaissance begins to bloom the Reformation occurs.

Reformation

The first stage of the Reformation began in 1517 A.D. when Luther nailed his famous 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. The Reformation went through three stages: the Lutheran stage, the Calvinist stage, and the Anabaptist stage. Each theological position emphasized a different approach towards interaction with society. For the most part, the Lutheran strain of the Reformation led toward a conservatism. Luther’s “two kingdoms” view left many thinking that any governmental or societal structure should be accepted as is since it was ordained by God and was His “left hand.” In sharp contrast, Calvin emphasized a transformation position in regards to societal structures. Herein a Christian is to transform society since God is both Creator and

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Redeemer. Whereas Lutheranism led to conservatism and Calvinism envisioned transformation, Anabaptists preached separatism. The Anabaptists advocated a separation from culture and an isolation from an active involvement in the society surrounding the Christian community. Since Lutheranism, Calvinism and Anabaptists all sent diverging signals as to the response of the church to culture, the church came out of the Reformation confused as to its role within society. This was a confusion it could ill afford in light of the next major historical epoch.

Enlightenment

It was during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the modern approach to most of the sciences and university disciplines developed. The period in which this revolution of thinking took place is referred to as the Enlightenment. This historical period was considered to be a decisive moment, a crucial time, or a turning point. It was an era noted for its general distrust of tradition, custom, antiquity and authority. Moreover, the mindset of the Enlightenment placed a premium upon skepticism, reason, and analysis. During the Enlightenment, six major intellectual movements occurred.

The first movement was historicism. The Enlightenment thinker began to view the past as something impossible to grasp. History was inherently deceptive. The new way to do history was to scrutinize the motives of the historical writer. One should look for the way the material is chosen and edited, for no historian was impartial. Each chronicler of history had an agenda for their choice and arrangement of data. The next major area to be affected by the Enlightenment was science. In the Enlightenment, science went from science to scientism. No longer is it the job of philosophers

and theologians to inform us about the world, but rather the only methodology capable of providing solid answers is the scientific method. Since science was explaining the world according to secondary causation, there was no need for a first cause nor a book that spoke of a first cause. Third, not only did historicism and scientism develop, but criticism as well. According to criticism, all documents from the past must be carefully checked for authenticity, accuracy, and factuality. No problem with that, but it went further than just "lower criticism." Higher criticism developed in which one, called into question any event stated in an historical document for which there was no analogy in the present time. For instance, regardless of the historical accuracy of the resurrection, since no one living had witnessed a resurrection, any document speaking of a resurrection must be called into question. Next came rationalism. In rationalism, reason becomes the test of all truth, including religious truth. Religious truths that offended reason must be eliminated. These truths were not eliminated because they were irrational (violated the laws of logic), but rather because they seemed scandalous to reason. Not only did historicism, scientism, criticism, and rationalism emerge during the Enlightenment, but so did tolerationism and Kantianism.

Due to the influence of travel and travel literature, perspectives began to change about human behavior. Since certain kinds of behavior were different from those practiced by Europeans, the conclusion was that human actions are determined by the surrounding society in which one lives. Thus, human behavior was considered relative to culture. As new cultures and religions were

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viewed, no one religion could claim absolute truth in the presence of other religions. Therefore, toleration becomes the supreme virtue in matters of religion and culture. Dogmatism is considered reprehensible. This begins the move away from a vigorous Christian theology and a move towards ecumenism and the study of religion as opposed to the consideration of theology.

In the Critique of Pure Reason Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) stated that everyone came to experience with categories in their mind. These categories of the mind organized the sense experience of an individual. Thus, Kant concluded that anything which was not available to the senses could not be organized by or known by the categories. This meant that God could not be known by pure reason. God was an entity beyond the capabilities of the categories of the mind. To somewhat save the situation Kant said, in his Critique of Practical Reason, that God needed to be posited for practical purposes. These practical purposes included such things as immortality and judgment. In other words, it was not rationally possible to consider God's existence, but it was practically necessary to have Him exist. For the first time we have a break between faith and reason. Faith must now operate apart from reason and, thus become irrational.

The Crisis of Faith

The nineteenth century has been designated "The Crisis of Faith." This century was marked by the presence of four major figures: Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Frederick Nietzsche. The Origin of the Species by Darwin sold out the day it was available to the public. Darwin's work shattered two important Christian doctrines: creation and the uniqueness of the human soul. For the first time an atheistic perspective had a theory by which to explain the origin of life. Freud contended that all human behavior could be explained by psychic forces. According to Freud, religious people had infantile yearnings for security and stability. Thus, they projected a god who would meet these emotional needs. In other words, the source of religion was not an objective being, but rather a subjective delusion grounded in psychic necessities. Marx took the entire discussion to another level. Marx contended that religion was evil. Religion was evil because it led people to be satisfied with their oppression. Those in control of society used religion to maintain the status quo. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche declared "God is dead." Nietzsche did not mean that a real being "God" died, but rather the concept of God which had been the organizing principle of Western society was gone. Thus, according to Nietzsche, since there was no longer a transcendent perspective there was no longer a basis for morality. Therefore, the person who understood this situation properly should impose their values on everyone else. This person was the "superman." Some forty years later a man in Germany fully caught Nietzsche's point and attempted to impose his values and his perspective on the world. His name was Adolph Hitler.

SUMMARY

Although there are more things that could be said about these previously mentioned historical periods as well as the twentieth century, I think I have adequately provided the backdrop for understanding modern day perceptions of religion in general and Christianity in particular. You can trace the perceptions that our modern world has directly to movements of the Enlightenment and to the views and philosophies of the major figures of the nineteenth century. In a coming article, I will discuss what I think are some things we must begin to do to change these negative perceptions of Christianity and begin to make a real impact for Christ in our world. ❖

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