

BOOK REVIEW

Beyond Christianity

Frank Parkinson

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Many books have been written on forms of spirituality that purport to offer more rewarding opportunities for self-fulfilment than the orthodoxies of institutionalised religion. Frank Parkinson's *Beyond Christianity* is one of them, and a rather special one. It reflects a lifetime's study and the mature reflections of a dedicated thinker, whose academic interests, following a career that began as a student engineer, were to embrace both the history of religious thought and the history and philosophy of science. As a passionate educator, with teaching experience in North and South American universities, in continental Europe and the UK, he was instrumental in devising in 1978, just prior to his retirement from Lancaster University, what he believed was the first British university degree in Human Communication. Enthralled by evolutionary models of human development, he described himself, on a more personal level, as a "seeker", one who in the present book writes with great sensitivity about the possibilities, hopes, and demands of a spiritual life in which the over-riding quest is to achieve a more intimate knowledge of, and ultimately union with, God.

He was well-prepared to do so, having been brought up as a Roman Catholic, teaching for three years in a Benedictine community in Canada, before undergoing something of a paradigm shift in his religious trajectory when he eventually became a Quaker. *Beyond Christianity* was almost complete when he died suddenly in October 2018. It is now published by his wife and family in his memory. I warmly recommend it for the insight it gives into what an ever-questing spiritual life may entail for a highly educated thinker. I particularly like his book because, while giving due weight to the physical and biological sciences in the corrosion of established religious creeds, he never discards the promise of an enriched spiritual life. Fired by the vision of a future in which humans may evolve into more, not less, God-aware beings, it is no paeon to atheism.

What exactly will his readers find? For one thing an uncompromising clarity in the writing. The author makes no bones about "the failure of all traditional religion", to which two scientific disclosures in particular have contributed: Darwinian evolution and the revelation that we live in a rapidly expanding universe. He calls for a "new theology", liberated from the dualistic metaphysics of prevalent forms of theism in which supernatural agencies mysteriously interact with the natural world. One also finds a

forthright recognition that humankind is facing unprecedented and cumulative challenges, not least because “our technical skill has far outstripped both our intellectual and moral development”. From my correspondence with the author, I know how much he appreciated the perspective offered by Yuval Noah Harari, in books such as *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*, to the effect that *homo sapiens* has elevated itself to be a god-substitute. He had become keenly aware of the challenges facing humanity from advances in artificial intelligence, particularly from omni-capable intelligent machines – a prospective development recently described by Stuart Russell in his 2021 Reith Lectures as marking the profoundest change in human history. It is a development that puts the spotlight on the central issues in *Beyond Christianity*: the essence of what it is to be human and whether future transformation of humankind is possible. As a response to the crises Frank identified in both science and religion, his book could not be more topical.

Despite his emancipation from institutionalised religious orthodoxies, it soon becomes clear that the author looks to many religious traditions, principally (but by no means exclusively) Christianity, for insights into these fundamental issues. In a short autobiographical statement, he has said that the writers he resonated with most strongly include the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi and the Indian guru Paramahansa Yogananda. From his studies he has concluded that those usually marginalised as “mystics” in their respective religious traditions are all saying the same thing, albeit with different cultural assumptions. Rejecting the materialism and physical reductionism that so often accompany the sciences, he is willing to draw on the teaching of religious mystics to articulate a vision of the authentic spiritual life, one which presupposes that there is something of God in everyone: “we are wrought from God’s own stuff, the very same”, as Frank puts it in one of his poems. Taking particular inspiration from Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and others who held that belief, an argument is built for the possibility, indeed necessity, of an enriched spiritual sensibility and even the future transformation of what it is to be human. Among modern theologians, Karl Rahner is introduced as one who insisted that Christianity itself would not survive unless it rediscovered its mystical elements. Yet something is seen as missing in Rahner - an awareness of the “evolutionary significance” of a fundamental change in which humans might achieve the mystic’s goal of being more God-aware and God-centred.

To speak of the *evolution* of such a sensibility could be a reference to the spiritual development of an individual; but it could also apply to a transformation of the very essence of what it is to be human. It is the latter that the author has in the frame, taking inspiration from the writings of the Jesuit evolutionary biologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Readers familiar with Teilhard’s synthesis of Catholic theology and

evolutionary biology will know that he envisaged a future “omega point” to which humankind is evolving when human beings will have achieved Christ-like qualities. On this view Christ’s singularity could be re-cast: no longer a one-off manifestation of divine Personhood but an advance representative of what *homo sapiens* could evolve into. The argument is that if Jesus is regarded not as a divine quasi-human but as an evolutionary forerunner, it is perfectly natural to regard him as a mystic and to take the imitation of Christ in this respect as the defining core of Christianity. Teilhard’s Christology was too heterodox for those who passed judgement on his writing and the author is keenly aware that his own precursors endured persecution as dissenters. Towards the end of his book there is a moving passage in which he writes that the quest for oneness with God is an “exotic doctrine” unlikely to be welcomed as leaven by any established religion. It is also a costly and uncomfortable goal because there is the constant gravitational pull to resume a normal, less aspirational life. As a philosopher of science, he admits that the concept of the God-centred or spirit-filled human is likely to be strange country for the scientist, since anthropologists have no category into which they can classify such a new kind of human being.

There is certainly a problem here, along with others that routinely surface when the power of new technologies to change the world can so easily overshadow older verities about the sanctity of a divinely created natural order. Frank does have an answer and he claims that it constitutes the “main pillar” of his book. It consists in the understanding of humans as “co-creators” with God, a view he cannot find in the Christian creed itself or in the teachings of any other religion. This is not an original concept since it has surfaced among religious thinkers seeking a new theology of technology, notably the Lutheran theologian Philip Hefner in his book *The Human Factor*. There was a similar approach in Teilhard de Chardin’s short devotional work *Le Milieu Divin*, where Teilhard argued that human efforts to improve the world should not be seen as intrinsically sacrilegious but as a “collaboration” between humans and their Creator. Hefner’s formula is the more radical because the term “co-creator” is more likely to attract censure for its seeming presumption, as I once discovered when in dialogue with Islamic scholars.

There is much more one could say about this challenging book, about Frank’s use of the term “entheism” to differentiate his brand of theism from its conventional forms and from pantheistic models in which the deity is identified with the world. It is perhaps closest in meaning to the pan-en-theism of theologians such as Arthur Peacocke, where all can be envisaged as ultimately “in” God. There is much more one could say about the crisis Frank saw in science as well as in religion, which he documented in his preceding book *Science and Religion at the Crossroads* (2009) – a crisis epitomised by inadequacies he saw in quantum theory, weaknesses in Einstein’s general relativity, and

the failure of attempts to integrate the two. Other topics on which there are engaging insights include the credibility of a literal Resurrection; the scope of transhumanism; the contrast between secular and spiritual modes of meditation; the contrast, too, between the thesis that “every convinced Christian is a mystic in embryo” and his alternative thesis that “the transition to mystical awareness is both a religious and evolutionary step-change”- one that normally calls for a specific decision.

This alternative thesis is his distinctive message in a book that exudes a rare honesty in its spiritual exploration. There is no attempt to conceal the problems, one of which he considers fundamental – that “we do not know what it feels like to have habitual and natural God-awareness”. He speaks mainly to those he describes as “religious individuals”, appealing most perhaps to those who share his disenchantment with what has been described as “overbearing tradition and hierarchical top-down theology”. It is an exploration both inviting and instructive.

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