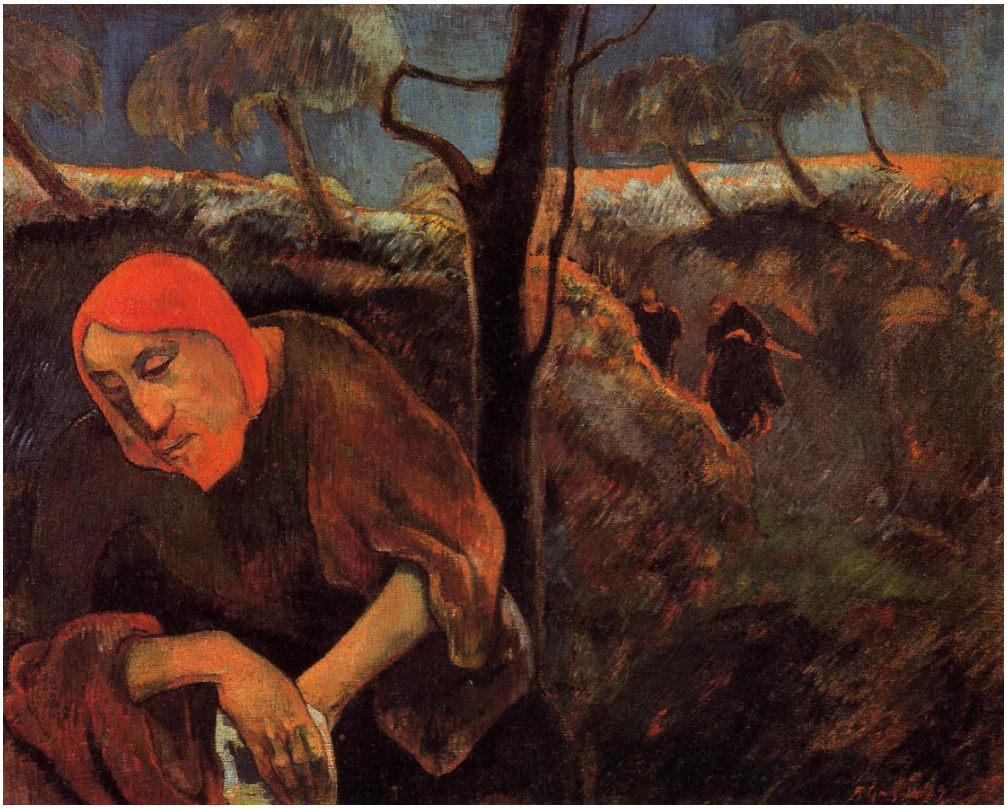
Reflections on ‘Epic’ Christianity

by Samuel Hux (October 2017)



The Agony in the Garden, Paul Gauguin, 1889

God knows why people go to church. (Well, if He doesn’t know, who does?) But, by “God knows,” I mean, as in the common usage, that *I* can’t figure out why.

This is not an atheist’s arrogance; I don’t belong to that proud and self-congratulatory club. In fact, whenever I think of Sam Harris, I want to change my name. It is simply a matter that, among the people I know who profess the faith, so few seem to have any recognizable

religious sense at all. They may “believe in God,” according to their own claims, but they are without appreciation of the mysteries at the core of Christianity; they are so impatient with any conception of Christianity beyond the admittedly laudable notion of “being a good Christian,” that is, acting as a decent person should.

Perhaps my experience is limited because of the profession I’ve practiced for decades: college professor of philosophy, literature, and the history of ideas. I taught courses in which religion, whether the official subject or not, could be avoided only by rigorous secular intention. Always, the professedly religious among the students are pleased to be studying scripture from Old and New Testaments and Apocrypha and classical texts such as Dante’s *Inferno*, a little less pleased (but dutiful nonetheless) to be examining representative selections from Augustine or Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther or John Calvin or the theological considerations in René Descartes or William James and the like—so long as the discussion is about ethical issues or the more easily graspable arguments for the existence of God . . . but not when questions of epistemology or metaphysics are raised. Then the eyes especially, but not exclusively, of the protestant fundamentalists, glazed over: preface to a radical change of mood, loss of interest, and often impatient anger.

What has any of this to do with “being a good Christian?” they seem to ask. They are here, after all, not to live the life of the mind but to hear something similar to a familiar sermon and receive college credit for having done so.

The identification of “being a good Christian” with behavior, with loyalty to the Hebraic Decalogue is, of course, a noble tradition and nothing to sneeze at; wiser and more sophisticated people than my students (and most of the religious whose religiosity I am skeptical about) have latched on to the notion as a civilizing necessity. When intellectuals and pundits take to the public square to endorse

religion (which becomes rarer by the year) they more often than not argue—even if they themselves may make no claim to conventional faith—that religion, specifically given Western cultural history of Christianity, is a necessity to ensure that an elevated moral tone rules in these perilous times. But one has to question (well, I do) if their good advice is all that compelling.

Bear with me: If I am told that I should not steal, kill, covet, etc., and that I should be inspired by the simple carpenter of Galilee who lived such an exemplary life, I might legitimately ask why. I might, rather, refrain from theft, murder, and active covetousness for quite other reasons: it makes my life safer, provided that others sign a figurative social contract to refrain from these things as well, as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, two radically different kinds of thinkers, argued. How, really, is keeping Jesus in mind a superior discipline to keeping *Leviathan* in mind? Indeed, Hobbes's reminder that life in a "State of Nature" is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" may fix in my mind the necessity of an economy of mutual good works more effectively than any advised *imitatio* of the Galilean.

The immediate answer of course is that Aunt Janice never read Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* and Uncle Harry had never heard of Hobbes; and, given the reality of curriculum requirements, neither has Cousin Trevor read and possibly even heard of either at Harvard.

So, faith in Christ will insure proper behavior so that they won't have to keep some intellectual image in mind to compel judicious propriety. To which I answer, in multiple fashion:

First, one doesn't have to read Locke or Hobbes to know this concept: you-be-decent-to-me-and-I-will-to-you. Such a self-discipline should be obvious and most often is to Harry, Janice, and their offspring—this not being rocket science.

Second, I honestly cannot observe any appreciable difference

between the behavior of a dear friend of mine who is committed emotionally and intellectually to the church, and another whose militant secularism makes me want to kick him in the gonads.

Third, well . . . the third deserves a paragraph, or more, of its own.

If I am agnostic about the efficacy of Christian ethics, let's call it, this doesn't mean that I am any less agnostic about pragmatic secular ethics. I could turn that sentence around easily.

Nonetheless, in spite of my generalized experience as suggested above, I have to admit—logic be damned—that I am more likely to trust my life to my religiously-committed friend than to that other. I don't mean to downgrade or show disrespect for the notion that "being a good Christian" is a matter of behavior. As a matter of fact, I have endorsed something like that notion.

I am on record (The Gentile Question: A Work in Progress, *New English Review*, August 2017) arguing that the Pauline elevation of Faith over Good Works as the path to salvation was in effect, no matter what St. Paul's intention, a relative devaluation of ethical behavior; that this exclusion of Good Works from soteriological considerations is analogous to the contemporary prejudice that there is no necessary connection between *being civilized* and *being moral*, just as there is no necessary connection between *having faith* and *being moral,* so that a son-of-a-bitch, rapist, murderer, what-have-you, could be considered cultivated so long as he practiced or appreciated the finer things (like, at the extreme, some Nazi fiddling Brahms at night after working at Auschwitz during the day); and that—here my thesis becomes either radically brave or perhaps foolishly provocative—the Pauline devaluation of Good Works, thoughtlessly radicalized by thinkers like Luther, bears some responsibility for the contemporary disconnect between culture and ethics. My essay just referenced, that is to say,

was an argument that the de-emphasis on ethical behavior as the essence of “being a good Christian” was a mistake.

I am about to consider a critique (and perhaps some revisions) of the argument summarized above, the subtitle of which was “A Work in Progress”—and progress does not always move in a linear direction.

There is something wanting in the notion of *religion as primarily an ethical urge or demand or inspiration.* For one thing, the emphasis on moral behavior as the *sine qua non* makes “being a good Christian” not such a difficult thing to achieve, since even a Hobbesian can, in effect, although for different motivations, achieve it. What we have then is a comical notion: a Hobbesian as “a good Christian.” That’s a rich one! So there *has* to be *something*—beyond, obviously, the promise of salvation (“What’s in it for me?”)—that makes Christianity more than a useful doctrine of proper behavior attached to a compelling narrative. And, of course, there is: what I like to think of as *the “Epic” quality of Christianity.*

Allow me please some free association. Christianity is an extremely interesting religion, rich in possibilities, contradictions, ambiguities, poetic resonances; it’s a faith which although posterior to Judaism seems somehow the elder—Sumerian, Eleusinian, Egyptian, almost—with its sacrificial God and Eucharistic mysteries. Candor compels an appeal to memories: a church at night is a spooky sight to a child, and the child is right. There’s no disrespect in reminding that there is something unnerving, given the receptive mood, about a faith whose central symbol is not a scroll but a figure nailed to a cross. It’s an endless source of the astonishing; sometimes a great deal less comforting than it is supposed to be, more obscure, unsettling, disturbing, dark and dangerous . . . and/but, for all that, oddly compelling and intoxicating. It is for one thing an elaborate celebration of mystery (and not only of The Mystery), a

recognition that things are not necessarily what they appear, a conviction that paradox isn't only a rhetorical strategy but an ontological condition.

Christianity is the most ambitious faith there ever has been. Which isn't to belittle the Hebraic visions of the Old Testament: the accomplishment of monotheism was an enormous task, and the establishment of a Law "unto all the nations." But Christian ambition was another matter. Its *c*atholicity! By which I don't mean only its linear universalism. Its Trinitarianism is a *c*atholicism much more encompassing than geography. God a Father, a Spiritual Essence, and a Son: the heavenly reaches, the ineffable and numinous and the mundane all enclosed within one concept. Sometimes it seems to me Christianity says to the world: Give me your tired and huddled masses of certainties, ambiguities, clarities, contradictions, fears, exaltations, disparities and conjunctions yearning to be One.

Perhaps the most ambitious incorporation of paradoxes involves the hoary question of theodicy (why the existence of evil in a world supposedly governed by a benevolent god). There are immensely complicated theological subtleties in the Christian rejection of Manichean tendencies. Rather than ascribe to evil an autonomous existence, we should see, as Augustine said, "There is no such entity in nature as 'evil'; 'evil' is merely a name for the privation of good." There is to me something shocking about this assertion coming from a man like Augustine, so accustomed to looking bravely into the abyss, and something thrilling in his capacity to force paradoxes to their extreme. We should appreciate apparently discrete evils "in their own nature, their position in the splendour of the providential order and the contribution they make by their own special beauty to the whole material scheme, as to a universal commonwealth." Those who do not appreciate "even fail to see how much those same things contribute to our benefit, if we make wise and appropriate use of them. Even poisons, which are disastrous when improperly used, are turned into wholesome medicines by their proper application."

Granted, in the particular passage (*City of God*, XI, 22), Augustine speaks specifically of mundane distresses “like fire, cold, wild animals, and so on” which the Manicheans would ascribe to the demonic; but it’s a hard task to avoid the suspicion that such apparently innocent good sense is another instance of epic Christianity’s wish, in defense of divine omnipotence, to incorporate the Enemy as paradoxical agent in order to have it all. Speaking of theological ambition . . ! And speaking of heroic (epic!) theologians . . .

It is impossible for me to read the history of Christian theology without thinking there are the Big Thinkers and the Lesser Thinkers, but who’s big and who’s lesser is as much an aesthetic judgment as it is a metaphysical or theological one. Augustine. Aquinas. Luther. Calvin. Who can escape the sheer monumentality of that *oeuvre (*of the first two especially*)*? But not Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), no matter how attractively he preached of man’s freedom to do good and rejected the notion of God condemning by predestination, because “His will is restricted by justice.” Not Pelagius (d. 420 circa), because his judgment that sin is not inevitable but conscious and willed choice of the bad in spite of knowledge of the good strikes me as not so attuned to complex factors of human psychology as the doctrine of Original Sin is. You wouldn’t wish to call John Wesley a big thinker in any case; but from my point of view he isn’t precisely for the reason that the great 18th-century American philosopher-theologian Jonathan Edwards is: in the latter there is a gloomy brooding over the inefficacy of human moral striving while in the former there is too much Arminian confidence in the ease of free agency. It does not “resonate.” The 19th-century “Higher Criticism” of David Strauss and Ernest Renan with their Lives of Jesus, and the others Albert Schweitzer explored in *The Search for the Historical Jesus*, is a monumental endeavor. But the overall thrust of 19th-century Protestant theology seems in comparison to the medieval and Reformation thought a lesser thing.

It’s a lesser thing because it incorporates and then softens the hard

edges of 18th-century religious rationalism and then gives birth in our century to the religious pragmatism which is “liberal theology”: avoid the myth, fix upon the ethical message. I don’t mean “Demythologizing” *per se*, for when Rudolf Bultmann (*New Testament and Mythology*) interprets the biblical mythology it’s not to strip the myth away to be cast away but to get inside the New Testament minds, who had a different cosmology, the better to grasp the *kerygma* (proclamation), the better to appreciate the sheer mystery of divine intervention in human affairs through the mission and crucifixion of the son of God. I mean, rather, the reductive identification of Christianity with a set of moral codes and the somewhat embarrassing talk about the simple carpenter of Galilee who is an inspiration to us all.

I occasionally teach a course in 20th-century Christian thought, in which one of the high peaks is reached, for me, in Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*, 1917), within which no more olympian dismissal of the priorities of liberal theology can be imagined. The pursuit of the Holy requires, writes Otto, that one avoid such definitions as the “perfectly moral” and “absolute goodness” to arrive at “a clear overplus of meaning,” the “numinous:” the Holy “Minus its moral factor.” The numinous is the *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*, the frightening awesomeness and over-poweringness and urgent energy and blissful fascination of the Wholly Other (*totaliter aliter*), which since it is ineffable can be talked about only indirectly by metaphor and analogy, as one suggests the *tremendum* by the “dreadful” and the *fascinans* by the “sublime.” Nor is the “perfectly moral” the original meaning of the Holy and the *numinous* “merely a later or acquired meaning; rather, ‘holy,’ or at least the equivalent words in Latin and Greek, in Semitic and other ancient languages, denoted first and foremost *only* this overplus.” While the Holy contains the moral, the ethical imperatives, it does so *because* it’s *das Heilige*