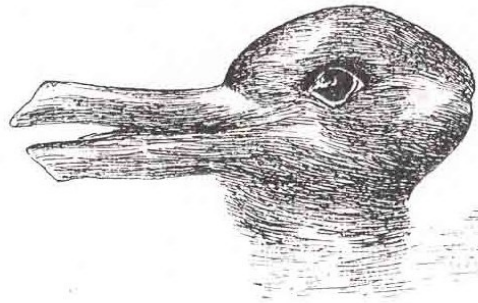


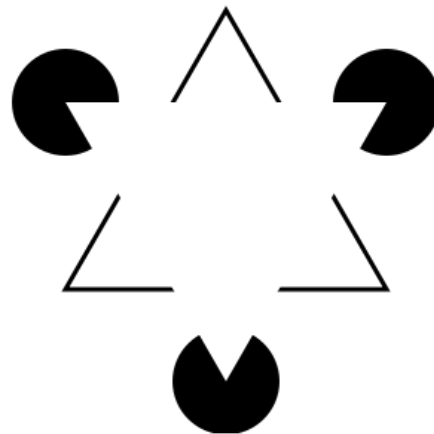
Does the Kingdom of God need God?

Clay Nelson © 29 November 2015

Making sense of the world is not easy. Psychologists explain that to do so it is necessary to organise incoming sensations into information that is meaningful. They think we do this by perceiving individual sensory stimuli as a meaningful whole. The brain creates a whole image from individual stimuli. Sometimes what we see is really there but we see different things like the optical illusion of a duck that also can be a rabbit.



Sometimes what we see isn't really there like the floating triangle.



Our brain makes sense of shapes and symbols, putting them together like a jigsaw puzzle, formulating that which isn't there to that which is believable.

It is my experience that the brain does this with ideas and concepts as well. We make assumptions based on stimuli that can come from experience, like the child walking in the evening, who occasionally looks over his shoulder to see the moon and assumes the moon is following him. We also receive stimuli from our nuclear family where we assume that because Mum always cooked and Dad always paid the bills, that that is what mothers and fathers always do. Our culture gives us lots of stimuli from which we make assumptions. Who knew that when you are asked to “bring a plate” there should be food on it?

Certainly the dominant religion of our culture gives us lots of stimuli from which we make assumptions and draw conclusions.

There was a time in my life in the US that I made time to play golf on occasion—badly, I might add. When I had some free time I would go alone and hook up with another single or threesome. I usually enjoyed meeting new people who shared a love of the game, but I remember one time I found it uncomfortable. When we were on the third hole the person I was playing with asked if I was a Christian just as I was lining up a short putt. I'm sure it was a tactic to throw me off my game, and it worked. I missed. I tried the gambit of telling him I was a priest, thinking that would end the conversation and, as a bonus, screw with his swing. It did neither. He pointed out that I

had not answered his question. And, indeed, I hadn't. That was the point where I knew I didn't know anymore. Like the triangle that isn't there, what I had one time tried to believe I could no longer find meaning in. I certainly didn't believe in a personal god up in the sky intervening in our lives, answering or even ignoring our prayers. Having followed the work of the Jesus Seminar from its inception, I no longer understood the historical Jesus to be the post-Easter divine Christ the church portrayed him to be in the Gospels or claimed him to be in its creeds. The concept of the Trinity no longer held any reality for me. Like the triangle there was no there there. So, judging by all the stimuli I had received in seminary and from many years serving churches, I had to assume I was a priest, but not a Christian. My struggle was I still saw myself as one. One moment, it was yes I am and next, no, I'm not. One moment I was a duck, the next a rabbit.

This tug-of-war between illusions continued until I came to New Zealand where I encountered for the first time the works of Lloyd Geering, Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University. The first thing I read by him was *Christianity Without God*. The title jumped out at me at the bookshop and I read it in nearly one sitting. I found comfort and affirmation in his arguments that belief in Christian formulations was not required to be a Christian. I could be a non-theist and a Christian.

Some of his arguments that especially resonated with me and maybe will with you were these:

He had this to say about the Bible: while modern science has changed our understanding of the world, we once understood it through the eyes of the Bible. The Bible was elevated in its authority as a means for the Protestants to defend their actions against the authority of the Catholic Church. In their "Reformed Confessions on Faith" trust in the Bible became the first article, and God was mentioned in the second. This made the Bible officially the same as God.

He supported the importance of doubt to our faith. The act of discarding outworn beliefs may not be a "lack of faith" but rather the opposite. It may open the door for genuine faith to operate again. "The assertion that one needs to believe in a particular creed or set of doctrines in order to have faith is an invitation, not to faith, but to credulity." Doubt is the enemy of false beliefs – as such, doubt is not the enemy of faith but its ally.

He showed how Christianity has constantly been remaking itself. The modern secular world, with all of its faults and problems, represents a new but legitimate stage in the Judaeo-Christian cultural stream. Just as Gentile Christianity, Medieval Christendom, and Protestantism were new phases in their eras – thus, the global secular world is not the end of the Christian stream, but its next phase.

About Jesus, he refers to James and Peter who viewed Jesus with Jewish eyes – as the Messiah but as a full human being just as themselves. They were rejected by Jews for declaring Jesus a Messiah and given a "cold shoulder" by the Gentile Christians for not accepting Jesus as divine. We hear nothing more of them after the 5th century. Christianity's focus by then had shifted from its original roots – and this is important – from the message to the messenger.

He argued that Jesus stood in the Wisdom tradition more than any other. "Jesus is one of the great sages in history," but also a secular one. His parables and aphorisms all but obliterate the boundaries separating the sacred from the secular. However, the Wisdom stream became completely overshadowed by the Pauline Gospel of the saviour Christ, crucified, risen, and glorified. I'll explain further in a moment.

Geering then moves towards his conclusion: The modern secular, humanist, post-Christian world not only flowed out of traditional Christianity but manifests the continuing development of elements intrinsic to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. For this reason, the modern secular and humanist world can legitimately be called "Christianity without God". In "Christianity without God" there is no place for the traditional figure of Christ as the divine Saviour. Yet there is certainly a place for Jesus the teacher.

Geering's conclusion is that Christians need not give up their Christian cultural heritage in order to follow a more sensible, realistic, and convincing system of thought. More importantly, that system of thought is naturally derived from Christian history and recalls its roots in all the ways that matter most.

Thanks to Geering I can now answer my golfing inquisitor unequivocally, "Yes, I am a Christian and a secular humanist; a rabbit and a duck."

For me it was intellectually and spiritually liberating to unapologetically study and speak about the historical Jesus without having to reconcile that understanding of him with what the church has said and does say about him. So today, I can, much to my surprise, tell you what a friend I have in Jesus. I would like to reintroduce him to you because what you think you know about him is like the floating triangle and mostly rubbish.

The Fellows of the Westar Institute spent nearly fifteen years searching the ancient records for the footprints and voiceprints of Jesus of Nazareth. They removed the mantle of the heavenly Christ figure, under which the early church had long hidden the original human Jesus and they uncovered those footprints and voiceprints.

The teaching of Jesus falls into two categories—short aphorisms (or one-liners) and parables. Now that is exactly the same genre as we find in the Jewish sages of the Israelite Wisdom tradition. If Jesus spoke chiefly in aphorisms and parables as the sages did, then he was closer to the Israelite sages than to the Israelite prophets.

To appreciate this we must turn back to the Israelite sages. There are four main streams of thought in the Old Testament—the Priestly, the Prophetic, the Royalist and the Wisdom tradition. The Priestly tradition (found in the Torah or Books of Moses) became the basis of Judaism. The Royalist tradition (found chiefly in Samuel and Kings but reflected elsewhere) became the basis of Christianity, since it claimed Jesus to be the Messianic King. The Prophetic Tradition (chiefly in the books of the prophets) was later revived by Muhammad and became the basis of Islam.

The sages who wrote Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Job, the Psalms and Proverbs, unlike the prophets and priests, showed little interest in the Exodus Tradition, the Davidic Dynasty or the destiny of the Israelite people. They focused on the issues of everyday life, as experienced by all humankind.

Modern scholars have called the Israelite sages the Hebrew humanists. They were not concerned with religion, as that term is commonly understood today. They were interested in how to deal with life's problems and frustrations. They did occasionally refer to "God" or "the Lord", and even spoke of reverence for God as the beginning of Wisdom. But they introduced the divine name as if it referred to the cosmic order of the natural world. (There was no word for "nature" in the Hebrew language.) "God" symbolized for the sages the way the world operates. For them, reverence for God meant reverence for nature, that is, learning to accept the way the world works and responding to it appropriately.

Jesus, just like the sages before him, did not say much about religion. Indeed, his mode of discourse was what we today call secular, meaning "this-worldly". He talked about daily life, the need to care for one another, and the problems that bring divisiveness and hurt in personal relationships. He made frequent reference to daily scenes such as vineyards, shepherding, building, the hiring of workers, the lending of money and the like.

Also like the sages before him, when Jesus referred to God, he was talking chiefly about what we call nature. Jesus said, "God causes the sun to rise on the bad and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust". But Jesus saw nature as a fatherly figure, much as we speak of nature as mother.

Jesus taught people to look into the future with faith and hope, but he never encouraged people to let God take over their lives and make all their decisions for them, as do some evangelicals today. Rather, like the sages before him, he urged people to take full responsibility for their lives and to make every effort to make the right decision in every situation.

The Israelite sage closest to Jesus is Ecclesiastes, for both deal with issues common to all humans irrespective of their cultural differences. They were both concerned with the best way to find personal fulfilment in life in the face of all the enigmas that life presents. But Jesus far surpassed him and the other sages who had gone before him. In the quality and depth of his teaching Jesus lifted the Wisdom stream to a new level. In the course of this he developed the parable into a unique new genre for which he rightly became famous during his own lifetime.

The chief theme running through those parables was not God but the kingdom of God. Jesus did not invent this term, for we find it occasionally in the earlier sages. Jesus fastened upon it, however, and made it central to his teaching. His parables often began, "The kingdom of God is like..." a mustard seed, a pearl, leaven, seeds among the weeds, a lost coin, a lost sheep, a net, etc. They were everyday items common to daily life. For Jesus, the kingdom of God wasn't about some invisible deity outside of our daily experience. There was no God, as is commonly understood, in his kingdom of God. The kingdom of God wasn't heaven in the next life. It was here now. Jesus used the image of the kingdom of God, to question us about our human attitudes to life and the nature of human relationships. As he did in his Sermon on the Mount, he was challenging the way we see ourselves, others and the world we live in; seeking to turn it upside down. Put another way, each parable is saying, "Look again." What we think we know as reality is really an optical illusion. To become fully human, fully alive we must discover the kingdom of God. It is not a place we go to when we die. It is a level of human consciousness. In the manner of an eastern sage drawing on story, not a western philosopher making an argument, he was seeking to raise our awareness.

As a sage he was aware that all growth in consciousness is a process of inner realisation. All inner realisations are the result of personal experience as mediated by something as simple as a parable. All growth in consciousness is a lessening of self-centredness, a "death" to the old self-centred way of looking at the world and simultaneous "rebirth" into a less self-centred way of seeing things. It is a process we go through repeatedly throughout our life, unless we decide the reality we know now is all there is. Psychologist Kevin Wilbur identifies nine levels of consciousness beginning with our realisation at about four months that we are physically separate from our mothers and ends when we attain what Jesus would call the kingdom of God, when we no longer experience the illusion of separation and find unity with the cosmos and all it contains. When we discover we are all stardust. On another day I will go into detail about each level. But just to tease your interest, most people never get past the third level of mythic consciousness and most of the rest of us have attained only the fourth level: rational consciousness. That means there is a lot more work to do if we want to reach the kingdom of God. It is five more levels away.

So why share all this about God and Jesus with a room full of sceptics, many of whom are avowed humanists? The first is to make you aware that Jesus was not the Son of God (he even said so repeatedly) but a humanist who would have been burned at the stake as an atheist by the medieval church. Second, is to make you aware that it is an illusion that you have to be a Christian to have a friend in Jesus. Jesus would frankly be more at home with you as a friend than with many Christians. Don't worry he has no interest in "saving" you, but in you finding your own salvation. And last, you don't need to believe in God to seek the kingdom of God. It is not a kingdom about God. It is a kingdom about you. Jesus wants you to know that the kingdom he is talking about is not an imaginary triangle and that you can be both a duck and a rabbit and ever so much more.