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Just Don't Call It Reformed Christianity

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If you're like me, you probably have friends who are not Christian—possibly Muslim or atheist (or whatever). I value these friendships despite our differences in worldview, and oftentimes we find great insights we can learn from each other. Accepting that we come from a different way of understanding reality makes it easier to get along: we don't expect each other to be in any sort of agreement with our own view. This is a given in the relationship. It also creates a boundary. There are places we cannot go together: we don't pray, worship, or join together with any assumption that we're inviting the Holy Spirit of the Triune God to indwell us and transform our lives and our community together (for instance). But these friendships endure and have value, despite their limitations.

What is more challenging is when we try to maintain healthy relationships, especially in large groups (such as our denomination), when there is an expectation of unity and cohesion among those whose worldviews have become irreconcilable. This expectation leads to turmoil and breakdown. This seems to be what is happening in the CRC. We have historically (since 1857) been the Body of Christ, the church, together doing our best to grow in faith and love in accord with God's revealed Word, acknowledging and applying our guiding creeds and confessions, and inviting the work of the Holy Spirit among us. But this has changed. A smaller but significant number of people in the CRC have found a new religion and are struggling to make it fit with the values, principles, and doctrines of Reformed Christianity. I've seen this all before—in the PC(USA), the ELCA, the United Church of Christ (now all the others as well)—and it is always the same thing. It is called perennialism and it is inconsistent with Christianity. (1)

Perennialism, sometimes called perennial philosophy or perennial religion, is a broad worldview that has existed for centuries and has taken many different forms over time.

The basic premise is that there is some form of divinity or enduring and creative spirit that underlies or exists alongside the everyday world we see when we drive to work or talk to a neighbor or pray for help. This spirit also explains the major religions in the world: each tradition, with its own sacred writings (Bible, Koran, Bhagavad Gita, etc.), beliefs/doctrines, values, etc., is simply the result of the interaction of people of a given geographical and historical location, with this perennial (or always existing) divinity or spirit. (2)

Having watched the response videos to the **Human Sexuality Report**, what stands out to me is not so much the usual arguments against what the church has known about human sexuality for 2000 years, but the introduction of a new religion. More importantly, this introduction is done in a way that attempts to transform and/or supplant Reformed Christianity, essentially making it into something completely different. (3) It's sort of like ice cream. Consider what ice cream is: cream (and often milk), sugar, coldness, and likely some flavoring or color added. Ice cream has specific ingredients that make it what it is, as well as a process for its formation (the churning). There are variations of course, such as adding cookie dough or adjusting the ratio of cream to milk—but it's still ice cream. Now what if I suggest that ice cream doesn't really need cream—how about soy milk instead? And what if, instead of sugar we use salt—looks just the same going in. And instead of cold churned, let's serve it up warm. I don't think anyone would agree that a warm cup of briny soy milk is ice cream. This is a simple analogy, but it is what's being presented in the response to the HSR, let me explain.

Reformed Christianity (or any authentic Christianity) has certain essential elements that make it what it is—it is a worldview in that it contains a distinct presentation of what is real (doctrine), a way for knowing what is real (God's revelation), and concomitant values and practices (most notably, a relationship with the risen Christ). What these responses to the HSR point to is a worldview characterized by *different* doctrines, knowledge-formation practices, and values, all of which are inconsistent with Reformed Christianity, and most consistent with perennialism.

The most important of these differences is their view of the Bible. As Reformed Christians we understand the Bible to be God's revelation—the inerrant, inspired, and authoritative word, sufficient for our understanding of who God is, who we are, and how

we should live (including how we should behave sexually and form families). To paraphrase The Response, their view of the Bible is that it is merely a collection of possibly or sometimes inspired human words that just represent one ancient culture's interaction with divinity/spirit (or "god"). Moreover, this record of interaction also represents what those people who were powerful and privileged enough to write the text want others to think, so while it may contain something 'true,' it is mostly just an artifact revealing an ancient patriarchal and oppressive culture. With this view of the text, it only makes sense to suggest that since we live in different times, we should have different values—including those pertaining to sexuality—so homosexuality, transgenderism, polyamory (or whatever) might accordingly be affirmed and promoted.

Thus, the main problem here is not the disagreement on human sexuality—this issue has become a Trojan Horse, introduced to unwary churches under the guise of 'social justice,' while simultaneously infecting them with the yeast of perennialism. And once our understanding of the Bible becomes radically altered to accommodate the tenets of this new religion, not only does it justify the new sexual ethics (or lack thereof), but it undermines every other doctrine, value, and practice that we call Christian. When the starting point for theological knowledge is this view of the Bible, read through current cultural ideologies (including an emphasis on individual feelings), (4) then there is no good reason (other than nostalgia perhaps) to uphold doctrines such as the creation *ex nihilo*, trinity, sin/fall, atonement, incarnation, virgin birth, salvation, bodily resurrection, consummation, etc.

Christianity, for perennialists, is a relic, a historical trajectory we just happened to be born into, alongside so many other religious traditions that all lead us to the present interactions with the divine/spirit, which will apparently lead to future developments in doctrines, values and/or practices that are likely radically different from today. This renders any distinctly Christian ideas optional, and merely happenstance—for instance, that we are created out of God's love, fallen as sinners in need of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, in faith adopted as God's children, promised eternal life in a new heaven and earth... (are you willing to part with these?) And as a cup of warm, briny soy milk is not ice cream, this perennialist worldview is not Reformed Christianity.

Having been around the block with these issues for a number of years, I recognize the emotional and social difficulties that come up when some of our own have effectively changed religions. These are irreconcilable differences, and to pretend they are not is to miss the point while stoking more tension and anxiety. My hope is that those who have become “progressive” (5) (2 John 1:7-9) and moved beyond God’s truth and sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2), will repent and be gently restored (Gal 6:1). Otherwise, they should at least acknowledge their new faith in perennialism, and not call it Reformed Christianity. In this case, my hope is that healing might be possible over time because we will at least no longer expect each other to live out the same religion. As with my Buddhist or atheist friends, we can live side by side in civil society, and with proper boundaries and sympathetic understanding, we can sometimes be friends as well.

(1) I understand the influence of postmodern philosophies, critical theories, etc. on this loosely aggregated post-Christian religion, but for those who hope to retain something non-physical (and likely mystical phenomenologically) in their view, perennialism still seems to fit the bill. Alternatively, I understand that others may simply be adopting the New Left, or ‘wokeism,’ as their religion, and attempting to reconcile that with Reformed Christianity—a task even more dubious than reconciling perennialism, but that is beyond the scope of this brief discussion.

(2) Perennialism and Religious Experience. Paul Draper. Religious Studies Archives (2020) 1, 1-7 Cambridge University Press 2020

(3) The argument is often made here that “always reforming” means embracing perennialism (or postmodern philosophies or critical theories, etc.), but it does not. “Reforming” implies the contextual application of sound doctrine, values and practices via *sola scriptura*, not by embracing novel human ideologies as interpretive lenses that force biblical interpretation toward pre-fabricated conclusions such as transgenderism. Reforming recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit over time in the construction of the Bible, as well as in the response of the church in each generation to the challenges of the day.

(4) I have in mind something like Charles Taylor's concept of expressive individualism.

(5) See John Piper's comments