

“NO SUCH THING” - A Response to James Franklin

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In December's *Quadrant* James Franklin asked “Is Jensenism compatible with Christianity?” and claimed of Sydney Anglicans that they “fear the gospels, for the gospel message is inconvenient”. This brand of “narrow” “Bible-based” Christianity pits Paul against Jesus, he says; engages in selective reading of the Bible; and creates “an inward-looking and recent sect.”

Professor Franklin's ungentlemanly squib does contain issues of substance, but they are concealed beneath an unfortunate tone and by his caricature of his targets. It is factually inaccurate, theologically mistaken, and biblically simplistic. Many of his objections have been standard responses to Protestantism since the sixteenth century. In this response, I will set aside Franklin's cheap shots and focus on what I see to be the major points of contention.

There is no such thing as “Jensenism”. What Franklin describes of his opponents is true of the classic Protestant orthodoxy of Luther, Calvin and Cranmer. His quarrel is really with them. These thinkers saw themselves as cleaning the scholastic and Aristotelian dust from the face of the Christian tradition. They returned, like the humanist-trained scholars they were, *ad fontes*: to the sources of Christianity, to the Scriptures in the Hebrew and the Greek, and to the Church Fathers, though not uncritically. Especially, Luther and Calvin saw themselves as the heirs of the great Augustine of Hippo.

It was Augustine's reading of God's grace and human nature that they recaptured, in the face of the sentimentality of much medieval piety. Which takes us to the first issue of substance in Franklin's piece: the human capacity to please God. The British monk Pelagius, spiritual guru of the Roman elite, claimed that human nature was basically good, if prone to stray. In the Pelagian scheme, Jesus Christ was offered by God as a model to guide human striving in decency.

It was a theologically preposterous and anthropologically naïve teaching; and Augustine proved decisively that true Christianity has a different tale to tell. In his time, Luther won an astonishing intellectual victory over the mighty humanist Erasmus on precisely this issue: the human will is not “free”, but rather bound in a prison of its own construction. And this is not merely a Pauline teaching: it was the teaching of Jesus himself that he had

come to “give his life as a ransom for many”, implying that what people need is not moral guidance, but liberation from bondage.

Jesus encountered people who could not present a skerrick of moral decency on their own behalf. They were the corrupt and the immoral; the untrustworthy and the greedy: and they knew it. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, retold by Luke, is a reflection on those encounters. The story provides a typical example of Jesus’ great reversal of human expectations: it is not the upright and superior Pharisee, confident in his tribal religion, who goes to his home at peace with his God - “justified” - but the shame-faced and desperate Tax Collector.

That human sin is an intractable problem is even the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount (which Franklin cites as an example of Christ’s moralism). When Jesus says “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”, he is echoing the words found in Isaiah 40: “Comfort, comfort my people...”. Why are they to be comforted? Not because they are the bereaved, but because they are the repentant. The punishment of exile has ended, and ancient Israel, in sorrow for their sins, are to be offered divine comfort. When Jesus says “Blessed are the peacemakers”, he has primarily in view those who seek peace with God – again picking up a theme from the second half of Isaiah’s book. (Franklin seems ignorant of the literary and historical context at this point – and yet he accuses his opponents of this!)

This teaching is no mere abstraction or fine point of doctrine: it powerfully explains the reality of human experience. History tells us that acts of human decency and generosity have been the exception rather than the rule; and that human beings are caught in an inexplicable web of which we are all the victims and the perpetrators. The Holocaust illustrates well the darkness of the human soul. If humane education or religious instruction were enough, surely Nazism would never have flourished among the Germans, of all people. It is dangerous to forget that even the best of us is capable of complicity in a great evil. This is indeed an “inconvenient” message.

Now, it is possible to dispute this reading of human nature, as Franklin does; but orthodox Christianity, following the Hebrew Bible, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the writings of Paul, has rejected Pelagianism and its variants as unorthodox. Franklin can’t have it both ways. He cannot both claim that the Jenses are guilty of diverging from the main stream of Christianity *and* criticize them for holding to utterly orthodox teaching. Franklin’s Jesus is not the Jesus of the gospels or of orthodox Christianity; he is the

rather limp, blond moralist of sentimental portraiture, whose message is not “good news” at all, since we human beings are unable to accomplish what he taught. Franklin’s Jesus is a threat to no-one; he challenges nothing. He affirms the smugness of the Pharisee.

But what we have said so far about humanity is merely the gloom in which the light of the world shines all the more: “the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Franklin writes: “the most unsavoury aspect of the Jesuites’ distortion of the simple message of Jesus is its concentration on sin and guilt without a compensating sense of human worth.” This is in its turn a gross and unfair distortion not borne out by any fair reading of his opponents. Sin and guilt are but the shadows cast by the cross of Jesus Christ, who died to reconcile God and people. The cross is a sign of how dire our state is; but it is also a sign of the profundity of divine love for us – which is more than a vague “compensating sense of human worth”, whatever that is: it is, in fact, a mighty demonstration of the love of God for women and men. A Christianity without either aspect is no Christianity at all. Franklin’s Christianity appears to be all Christmas and no Easter.

And to respond to this is faith. Franklin offers a lazy caricature of the Protestant understanding of faith: “...what God wants is belief in certain propositions about Jesus and salvation, and without that belief good actions are not pleasing to God.” Faith is not assent to doctrine: faith is trust in the promises of God. It is the response that Jesus himself preached for when he declared “the Kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news.” That human beings are justified by faith alone – a central Reformation teaching rooted in turn in the teachings of Jesus and of Paul – is to remove grounds for any ranking of human beings on the basis of alleged religious, racial or moral superiority.

Franklin contests the Protestant reliance on “Scripture alone”: only, he has no idea what it means, declaring that it means there is no place for the tradition of the Church. This was not and is not what this is taken to mean. “Scripture alone” is a slogan about ultimate *authority*. The Reformers never excluded Church tradition from consideration, as anyone who has read them knows. But Scripture over-ruled the Church and its traditions: later developments, like compulsory clerical celibacy, could be abandoned as inauthentic. More importantly, the corruptions of the Church could be challenged and reformed from the standpoint of the teachings of Christ and his apostles contained in the Bible. To put the Church over Scripture is to invite ecclesiastical triumphalism.

This was in fact an ancient belief: Jesus' regard for the authority of the Jewish scriptures was in turn ascribed to his teachings and to the teaching of his apostles. The communities begun by Jesus were formed around his teachings, as Israel had gathered around – and under - the *Torah*; it is adherence to those teachings that defines them as his communities. A fundamental contradiction in Franklin's account is that he wants to contest the status of the Bible for Christianity and then argue about its contents. Why should he care?

Franklin's attempt to belittle orthodox Protestantism ultimately fails, because he has not given it a fair and dispassionate hearing. He fails in his attempt to drive a wedge between "Sydney Anglicans" and the teachings of Jesus. Ultimately, though, whether "Jensenism" is given a fair hearing or not is of small consequence: what matters is whether the true message of Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ, is heard.

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