

World Missionary Conference, 1910

(To consider Missionary Problems in relation to the Non-Christian World)

THE HISTORY AND RECORDS OF THE CONFERENCE

TOGETHER WITH
ADDRESSES DELIVERED AT THE
EVENING MEETINGS

PUBLISHED FOR THE WORLD MISSIONARY CONFERENCE BY
OLIPHANT, ANDERSON, & FERRIER
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
AND THE
FLEMING H. REVELL COMPANY
NEW YORK, CHICAGO, AND TORONTO

CHRISTIANITY, THE FINAL AND UNIVERSAL RELIGION

I. AS REDEMPTION

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR W. P. PATERSON, D.D.,
EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY

*Address delivered in the Assembly Hall on Wednesday
Evening, 15th June*

MR. CHAIRMAN and Fellow-students, the Foreign Mission Movement is a gigantic enterprise which rests upon a tremendous assumption. The assumption upon which it rests is, that the Christian religion is superior to every other religion that exists or has existed upon earth, and that consequently we are both entitled and bound to try to persuade every tribe or nation which has not already become Christian to exchange its ancestral faith for our own. To-night I mention a few considerations which justify this tremendous assumption.

The best test, I think, is to ask what is involved in the idea of religion—to ask what is the common purpose in the religions of the world—and then to consider how Christianity stands forth clearly and imperially as the absolute or perfect religion. Now, I would have you observe that, innumerable as are the differences betwixt the various religions, there are three respects in which they can all be compared one with another. The first is that every religion that has struck root upon the earth has claimed to bring a deliverance from very great evils, and to put men into the possession of true and lasting

good. The second thing, as I conceive, is, that it is always expected and hoped that in and through union or friendship or alliance with a Divine Being or Beings this purpose can be secured. The third point is, that in every case you have the theory of what a man has to do, or what a man is to be, so that he may possess the friendship of this Divine Being or Power in union with whom he gains the victory over the evil that is in the world. Now, inasmuch as every religion in some sense claims to be a redemption, it seems to me that the truest way in which to realise the pre-eminence of Christianity is to compare it with the other religions in respect of these three points—first, the Boons which it promises; secondly, the Idea of the Divine Being or Power; and third, what we may call its Theory of Salvation. I shall endeavour to develop my theme by a brief comparative study of Christianity from these three points of view.

In the first place, I have said that every religion that has been of any account at all has claimed to be a deliverance, a salvation, a redemption of some sort. In modern times we give the name of religion to other things. When a man stands filled with awe in contemplation of the illimitable, we perhaps call these feelings of his the essence of religion. We also sometimes speak of a system of ideas as being a religion. Then, at other times, we say morality and religion are identical. "The virtue of the good man is the core of his religion, and it is all the religion that any man needs to have." Now, the fact is that these conceptions of religion which identify it with æsthetic feeling or morality are utterly and entirely wrong. Religion has always claimed to be a provision which does work in satisfaction of human needs, analogous rather to agriculture or to manufacturing, and has undertaken to protect man from evil and to give him the possession of what he regards as his highest good. When we consider further, what it professes to do for man, I find that there are three outstanding answers which are given. The first is the purely heathen answer that what man gets through religion is material blessing. He looks to his religion to protect him from sickness, from disease, and from death. He looks to his religion to give him, if he is on the

savage plane—perhaps if he is on a higher plane—to give him such things as rain, an abundant harvest, a sufficiency of wives and children, and victory over his enemies. The purely heathen conception simply is that religion is a valuable commercial and military asset. That view is confirmed by the general testimony of the schedules which I have had the opportunity of reading regarding the religions on the animistic level. The second type is very different. It is what I call the pessimistic, and it is represented by the idea that lies at the heart of the great religions of India. In Brahmanism and Buddhism nothing is looked for at the hand of God from the blessings of this world at all. The world has become an illusion, and the things of the world are nothing and less than nothing. The idea gains force that existence itself is an evil, and the true deliverance for which man looks is escape from a weary and unprofitable maze by an inward deliverance that leads to extinction or absorption in the Infinite. With this pessimistic valuation, there is something that in some moods we can all sympathise. But while we admit how much greater the conception is, that it is inner wealth that is to be secured through religion, not mere material blessing, one asks, After all, is the last word on the chief good that it is a mere negation? Are we not entitled to take a bolder and more confident, a more positive view of the blessings that are in store for those who put themselves upon the side of the Power that rules the universe? And so we come to the third, the Christian answer, which to some extent coincides with the reply of the great religions of India, but which also differs from it in some important respects. It agrees with Brahmanism and Buddhism, in respect of the idea that the cardinal blessings that we look for as the end of religion are an inner salvation and possessions of the soul. No doubt there have been times when Christian people have had the purely heathen idea about God—that He exists to guarantee us external blessings. There have been nominal Christian people who have lost their faith in God, because disaster overtook them in their business, or because their home was desolated by the death of wife or child; but the distinctive Christian

idea, according to all trustworthy authorities, is of course different. It is that the supreme blessings of religion are of the nature of a spiritual salvation. In the words of our Catechism, the supreme blessing is a justification, "wherein God pardoneth all our sins and accepteth us as righteous." It is a sanctification, "whereby we are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness." In the same context we have a list of the things that accompany this central blessing, namely, "assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end." To that extent there is coincidence, but mark next the difference. While for the higher mind of India existence is the cardinal evil, for Christianity the cardinal evil from which we have to be delivered is not existence but sin. Further, note how it breaks with the pessimistic strain in its teaching on the subject of immortality. It is said by a great modern writer on the philosophy of religion that what religion exists for is the conservation of values; and if it be so, surely that is not the perfect religion in which character, the noblest product of time, is either annihilated or lost in unconsciousness by absorption in the Being of God. Surely it is a note of the perfect religion that it teaches the conservation of personality. The other great contrast may be put in concrete form in this way, that a begging friar is the ideal of India, while the Christian ideal is represented rather by the Christian statesman or the Christian man of science, or even by the Christian merchant or farmer. In one word, while we hold as Christians that the cardinal boons of our religion are inward and spiritual, we are far from despising the world. We hold that God's promise is that we shall inherit the earth. We hold it to be His purpose that we should fill the earth, not only with holiness and righteousness, but with the machinery of civilisation, and that the tribes and peoples of the earth, with all the elements of worth and of human well-being that are realised or realisable among them, should be incorporated in the more comprehensive whole of the Kingdom of God.

My second test, upon which I will dwell more briefly, is the Idea of God. We are told that there are atheistic religions

—I do not believe in them. I think that what is essential to the religious idea is that in alliance with a Divine Being or Beings, or at least with the principle of a Divine world-order, man is delivered from all evil and is made the possessor of true and enduring good. Now, notice again the ascending scale. Down on the animistic plane, to whom do men look for these blessings? There is often in the background a vague conception of a Supreme God, but for all practical purposes their gods are the ghosts of their ancestors and other spirits. That, of course, is useless. Some of you may remember that when Heine looked upon the Venus of Milo he wept because while she was entrancingly beautiful, she had no arms. That is the condemnation of the worship of the animistic tribes. There is something beautiful in the sentiment of ancestor-worship, but as a religion it is a delusion and a snare. It contains at most some elements of Spiritualism, whatever that may be worth. As regards the second type of religions, I think it can be taken, on the basis of the evidence submitted to the Conference, that on the whole the idea of God cherished by the higher Indian mind is the pantheistic conception. What does it mean? I will put it in two brief sentences. It is that "God is to be addressed not as Thou but as It." The other sentence I will quote from one of the schedules, and is to this effect: "The Hindus have never fallen so low as to believe in a personal God." Now, if the annihilating criticism of ancestor-worship, from the religious point of view, is that the beings worshipped have no arms to help, the fatal criticism of the pantheistic systems is that their God has no eye to pity and no heart to sympathise. The choice must abide with one of the three monotheistic religions. It cannot be Judaism, because that is confessedly the preliminary stage of Christianity. It cannot be Mohammedanism, because though it contains many elements of theological truth and some morality, its God seems to include among his attributes something of the caprice and of the cunning of an Oriental despot. We are left finally with Christianity, the religion of the God of the infinite attributes, the religion also of the

Incarnation. We are left with the idea—surely the most sublime and adequate that ever was conceived—the idea of a God who has all the power and who has all the will to bless the sin and sorrow-laden children of mankind—a God who on the one hand possesses all the might and all the wisdom of the Infinite Godhead, and who on the other hand has in His heart the love wherewith Jesus Christ the Incarnate Son loved sinful men and women, and loved them to the end.

My third point I will touch on briefly. It is the Theory of Salvation—the question as to how we are to enter into terms of friendship with this Being who can give us the victory over the world. Every religion has addressed itself to that problem. Here, again, we have three answers. I begin with the lowest answer—the heathen answer—which is a very intelligible one. Supposing that we want to propitiate a very powerful man, and supposing that we have not very lofty principles about the methods we employ, we shall make him presents and offer him adulation. That is the true heathen idea, to offer presents, usually in the form of sacrifices, to the god, and to chant his praises in prayer or in song. How worthless that conception is, when it is the whole theory, we know from the contempt and scorn that are poured upon it in many a page of Old Testament prophecy. The second theory is represented generally in the great ethical religions of the world. You find it in Buddhism, to some extent in Brahmanism and Mohammedanism,—in Babylonia, in Assyria, in ancient Egypt,—you find it even in the literature of Greece and Rome. The idea is, that the way to please God is to follow the paths of virtue. God is the author and the upholder of the moral laws. The way to His favour is to render obedience to these moral laws. If we do, He will protect us and bless us, while if we break these laws He will visit us with punishment, or it may be with destruction. The Old Testament religion gave expression to this idea in its clearest and strongest form. “Of what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me, saith the Lord”—there is the repudiation of the purely heathen idea. “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and

to walk humbly with thy God?" One might have supposed that that was the highest level that could be reached in the development of religious thought: Be a good man and you will enjoy the forgiveness and the protection of the Great Father in Heaven. And yet there is another and a more profound conception that was to come to the world in the Christian revelation. Christianity, of course, is also one of the great ethical religions. Christianity is the most ethical of them all. In none is the standard of duty so highly pitched—in none has there been generated such an earnestness and enthusiasm for righteousness and for service. And yet, according to the Apostle Paul, it does not put righteousness in the same position which it occupies in ethical religions. Their message was, "Keep the moral requirements of God and you will attain His favour." But Christianity turns it round and offers the full forgiveness of our sins for Christ's sake as the starting point, and undertakes that we shall then go our way under the impulse of gratitude, and under the influence of God's Holy Spirit, to accomplish a righteousness greater by far than the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. First evangelical and then ethical, I take to be the distinctive note of the Christian religion at this point. "By grace are ye saved through faith." "I beseech you by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." A religion without grace is as useless as a religion without morality is contemptible; and we may well regard as the perfect religion that which, while making effective provision for morality, puts in the forefront the unspeakable magnanimity of God, and terms of salvation which even the weakest and worst may find power to fulfil.

I am aware that this argument is not entirely conclusive as to the truth of Christianity. I do not think that it is difficult to prove that Christianity is superior to every other religion—superior in respect of the blessings which it promises to man, superior in respect of its conception of God who unites infinite power with inexhaustible love, superior in its marvellously profound

conception which we describe as justification by faith. But, even after you have proved it to be the perfect religion, there still remains the question of questions as to whether it is trustworthy and true. It might be that it only represented the last stage in a long series of attempts in which the human mind has endeavoured to find some protection, even if it were only imaginary, from the woes under which the human race groans and travails. In regard to that there are two concluding observations I should like to make. The first is that if Christianity be the perfect religion—perfect in idea—then we are entitled to trust it. Along every other line of human activity, in science, in art, in morality, we see that we are advancing to a goal, and it would be to contradict the order under which we live if we held that in this chapter of history alone it was different—if we held that here alone we were to make the discovery that the greatest that had been achieved was to be described as the baseless fabric of a vision. The second consideration is this, that every religion that has been in the world has claimed to do work, and if we test the truth of Christianity by the work that it has done, its claim, I uphold, will stand. We cannot test all its works, for some of the results lie behind the veil, but some of them we can test. We see its power in the regeneration of character; in the opening up of sources of the highest moral energy that has been seen in the world; in a degree of religious assurance to which no other religion can lay claim; and inasmuch as men do not gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles, we say that this religion, which has contributed the highest elements of the spiritual life to mankind, must be rooted in everlasting truth.