

**THE CHRISTIAN LIFE
AND MESSAGE
IN RELATION TO
NON-CHRISTIAN SYSTEMS**

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A STATEMENT OF THE CASE FOR EVANGELIZATION

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I

THE comparative study of religion has commonly been pursued by those who had little or no personal conviction of the uniqueness of the Christian revelation. Consequently it has tended to start with the assumption that all religions stand, more or less, on a level ; they are treated as variants of one general tendency of the human mind ; if there is any divine impulse behind them it is sought chiefly in that general tendency rather than in the distinctive features of any particular religion ; and so far as it is allowed that one religion has more divine authority than another, this is understood to mean that it corresponds better with the real nature of the impulse that finds expression in all religions.

But to begin thus is to begin with the unproved denial of the claim which Christianity makes. It is not to be wondered at that, having made this great negative assumption, the comparative study of religion goes on to trace parallels and resemblances in every direction ; nor that, having traced these, it should create in the popular mind a belief that the inner essence of all religions is identical while they differ in their vehicles of expression. But this resultant belief in the popular mind is certainly

false. The fact is that religions differ comparatively little in their vehicles or media of expression ; they differ widely and deeply in their essence. For the essence of a religion is the character of the God to whom worship is offered.

Ours is the age of psychology. Whenever a new science begins to establish its position it casts a glamour upon the human mind. Mathematics is the most fundamental of sciences and was the first to establish itself. Forthwith there arose a school of philosophy—the Pythagorean—which professed to find in number the explanation of all things. We leap over the generations and find the triumphs of physics and chemistry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries giving rise to a philosophy—materialistic determinism or naturalism—which repeated for those sciences the attempt made by Pythagoras on behalf of number. Argumentatively, naturalism (as far as English writings are concerned), was annihilated by James Ward in his brilliant Gifford Lectures on *Naturalism and Agnosticism*. But a popular belief has great power of surviving its own dialectical destruction ; and naturalism is now dying out, not through defeat (though it has been defeated), but through its displacement by an outlook based on the newly prominent science of psychology.

This science, following the best precedents, also aspires to a universal domination. All beliefs and experiences are subjected to its scrutiny. So far, that is quite right. It was possible to claim for number the power to explain all things only because all things that exist are capable of being counted ; so that, as Edward Caird used to say, ‘ The science of quantity does tell us something about everything ;

but then it tells us very little about anything.' In just the same way, psychology can tell us a good deal about all our experiences, opinions and convictions; it can tell us how they tend to arise and to group themselves together; and because it can tell us something about all experiences and beliefs, people often take it for granted that it is itself the ultimate science. But there is one thing—quite an important thing—that psychology can never tell us about our beliefs; it can never tell us whether they are true. As soon as that question is raised, psychology is powerless. The psychologist may trace the process by which I come to hold a belief, but unless it allows some other test of the truth of my belief than this, I can retort by tracing for the psychologist the source of his belief about the source of my belief. Even if it were the true psychological account of men's religious faith that they invented the idea of God as a refuge from the miseries or injustices of life, there would still be the question whether God actually exists.

Now the comparative study of religion has been conducted on anthropological and psychological lines. To pursue it upon those lines has been perfectly legitimate, so long as the limitations involved are recognized. All religions have aspects for which such study is appropriate. But no religion, in the estimate of its own adherents, is exhausted by those aspects. Every religion claims to be, not only a state of mind in those who practise it, but an apprehension of a truth which is independent of their minds altogether; and its whole significance for them resides in this. Consequently the process by which the comparative study of religions has appeared to put all religions on a level is one which first

eviscerates all religions of all that causes any one to care about them. In other words, if what this sort of comparative study can tell us were the whole truth, there would be no religions at all to be studied or compared.

The essential element in any religion is its claim to be true, whether partially and relatively, or completely and absolutely; to put it another way, the essential element in any religion is not to be found in a human attitude towards something, but in the something towards which that human attitude is taken up. The essential element in any religion is the character of its God. And it is here that religions deeply differ from one another.

The tendencies of the comparative study of religion have had a natural reaction on many Christian people, who, being convinced of the uniqueness of the revelation entrusted to them, shrank from all contact with a method of study which seemed to rest on the denial of that uniqueness. Consequently there was not a little anxiety when it became known that the International Missionary Council was to be asked to discuss 'The Christian Life and Message in relation to Non-Christian Systems,' and that to facilitate such discussions a series of papers had been prepared, setting forth the distinctive 'values' of those systems. In some quarters there was a fear that the Council would turn out to be committed, by merely embarking on this enquiry, to some sort of vicious syncretism or to the denial by implication of the uniqueness of the Gospel. Nor can it be denied that there was inevitable risk in the method adopted. But here, as so often, the avoidance of risk merely means the deliberate choice and acceptance of one particular disaster. For how are we

to proceed from the assertion of the uniqueness of Christ to its demonstration, unless there is instituted a comparison between the Gospel and other religions at their best? Moreover, uniqueness is not the only attribute of the Gospel; universality is another. And how are we to present Christ as the fulfilment, and more than the fulfilment, of the highest aspirations of the many races of mankind, unless we know sympathetically what those highest aspirations are? The message actually adopted by the Council is the true justification of the method which it followed.

II

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He hath visited and redeemed His people.' It would not be fantastic to say that the first verse of Zachariah's hymn contains the whole distinctive element of the Gospel. At any rate it fastens attention upon the belief in a God who is active in the world, and has taken action for the salvation of men. The fundamental presuppositions of Christianity have so far permeated western thought that we are liable to regard them rather as springing from the western temperament than from the Christian revelation. So it is with the belief in God as Righteous Will, whom we must serve, not by ceremonial observance or even by contemplation and mystic absorption, but by the submission of our wills to His—and this, not because He is Omnipotent and can destroy those who resist Him, but because He is Holy and His Righteousness commands the assent of our consciences. We contrast the western insistence on the Will with the eastern contemplation of a static

Being. But that insistence upon the primacy of Will is not native to the West ; the West learnt it from Israel ; it came into human thought and belief through Moses and the Prophets.

When we enquire into the religious state of Europe before its conversion to Christianity we find a condition of affairs very like what is met with in the non-Christian regions of the earth to-day. The religious phenomena of the Græco-Roman world are very like those of contemporary India. There was a welter of cults and deities, some edifying, some degrading, most (perhaps) capable, like the worship of Dionysius, of being turned either way by the interpretation of individual worshippers. There were sublime philosophies for those who could appreciate them, and these were often presented as a sort of interpretation of the current religious beliefs. There was a strongly defined social ethic, but its relation to religion, whether popular or philosophic, was hazy. Plato here, as so often, bursts the mould of Greek thought and reaches out towards a living and righteous God ; but the more consistently Hellenic Aristotle does not allow God even to know of our existence ; for His perfect knowledge cannot condescend to ' particulars ' ; He lives in the thinking of thought. And the highest life for man is not co-operation with God in the fulfilment of His purpose, but contemplation of Him and participation to the utmost in His intellectual beatitude, for which a complete self-control in relation to all passions is an indispensable condition. Plainly there are here clear affinities with (for example) Hinduism and Buddhism. High-sounding aphorisms flowed readily enough from the lips of those who had this background to their lives ; but there was no general expectation of corresponding conduct. We

often hear quoted as evidence of a noble ethical standard in pre-Christian Rome the line

‘*Homo sum : nihil humanum a me alienum puto,*’

but it is deeply significant that into the mouth of the man who makes this high profession Terence also puts an injunction to his wife that if the child she is expecting proves to be a daughter it is to be ‘exposed,’ that is, left to die.

The belief in the supremacy of righteousness both in the universe, because God is righteous, and in humanity, because God has made man in His own image, is not native to the West ; it came to the West from Israel. And it was not native to Israel ; it came to Israel through the prophets.

Here is the first point on which we must lay our stress—the unique revelation alike of God and of man which is given through the Bible. The true division is not between West and East, but between Bible and no-Bible. It is possible that there is in Zoroaster that same apprehension which, broadly speaking, is characteristic of the Bible only. If so, it should not surprise us ; the fact that rays of the true light shine everywhere is no contradiction of the other fact that in the Bible they are focused as in a burning-glass. Islam is either a development (as it claims) or a perversion (as we think) of the strain that once found its home in Israel, and therefore has inherited much of the Biblical outlook. But it has gone back from the proclamation of a righteous God who is almighty to the conception of an almighty God whose commands determine what is righteous ; and so far it inclines away from the true prophetic faith towards the common tendencies of human religion.

‘Salvation is from the Jews.’ That is the first contention in the case for evangelism as I see it. No doubt this makes the reception of the Gospel hard for many races ; hard, for example, for India, with its consciousness of special spirituality ; hard for Europe, with its tendency to appropriate as its own whatever it finds precious ; hard for Israel, because of the necessary implication of a confession of a national apostasy in the past.

III

But the Bible, as the sacred book of Christians, is always to be interpreted in reference to Jesus Christ. It is He who, by fulfilling its earlier aspirations, confers upon it a unique quality. Elsewhere in the Bible the word of God is heard in ‘divers portions and in divers manners’—but He is Himself the very Word of God. The light shines elsewhere also, and not only in Scripture ; indeed it ‘lighteth every man,’ but in Jesus Christ it shone forth in its full splendour. Therefore we must remember that, as He is the crown, so He is also the criterion of all revelation. Whatsoever in other revelation is incompatible with what we find in Him must be attributed to the human medium through which the revelation comes. For God did not at the time of the Incarnation first become what He is there revealed to be ; the Incarnation is the self-disclosure, at a moment of time, of what God eternally is.

Thus our reading of the Bible other than the Gospels will be deeply reverent, but also critical. Yet the standard of our criticism will not be our own preferences or even our own convictions, except so

far as these are founded on Jesus Christ. He cannot be fully understood apart from the preparation for His coming in the history and religious experience of Israel; therefore the Old Testament is an indispensable part of our Message. But, if the Gospel be true, the Old Testament cannot be properly understood at all except as it is fulfilled in Him; therefore, though the whole Bible is our sacred Book, it is yet true and vitally important that the Message of Christianity is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But as we must bear in mind that the Bible which is fundamental for Christianity is the Bible as focused in and interpreted by Christ, so too we must remember that Christ is Himself the heart of the Gospel, not as a merely historic Figure who once lived on earth, but as the one historic Figure in whom the Eternal God is once for all revealed. What matters in any religion is always its doctrine of God. We may meet with people who, looking on from outside, wonder at the sharp division which Christianity maintains between itself and Islam. 'After all,' they say, 'both are forms of faith in the One God; you say that Jesus is His spokesman; Moslems agree, but say that Mohammed also is His spokesman. Is the difference so very great?' We must answer, 'Yes, it is the greatest possible; for the character of Allah in Islam is totally different from the character of the Father in Christianity. We claim that Jesus Christ is more than one among many divinely inspired teachers; we claim that He is actually God. And we make this claim for Him, not chiefly in order to honour the historic Jesus; He sought no such honour. We make this claim for Him, because what is of vital consequence is the character of God. It is not because He had a new conception of God that

men have found in Jesus Christ the Saviour of themselves and of the world ; it is because they have found Him to be Himself the Eternal God.'

This claim can only be finally established by a complete philosophy and the experience of mankind. But it glows as a conviction of faith at the very heart of Christianity. We do not expect to see it logically proved ; what we have a right to expect is that when applied to actual problems, practical or theoretical, it should guide us towards a solution ; and this is what we actually find. Yet it is not the strength of its intellectual position by which it wins victories over individuals or races ; it is its manifest power to re-create alike the soul and society. 'As many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God.' That is not the utterance of an aspiration, it is the record of an observed fact, and it is the observation of that fact that has drawn, and still draws men to Christ as the source of the new vitalizing power.

IV

Christians are naturally and rightly eager to divert attention from the evidence of their own lives to the essence of the Gospel itself. We know ourselves to be unworthy representatives of Christ, we know our civilization to be most meagre as a measure of what God in Christ can do for men in answer to their faith. So we ask them to look, not at us, but at Him ; and we do well. And yet, they too are right when they turn back to us enquiring for the proof that the Gospel is indeed possessed with power. Its beauty they see in itself ; its power they must see in our lives if they are to see it at all.

To the Christian there should be no need to argue the case for evangelization ; yet it seems that it is necessary ; for Christians often fail to apprehend the nature of their own religion. They think of it as one among the religions of mankind, and look out for its distinctive characteristics, and contentedly classify themselves as Christians, and others as Moslems, or Hindus, or whatever it may be, as though they were speaking of so many political parties. They think of Christianity as the appropriate religion for Europeans or Americans, while Islam is the appropriate religion for Arabs and Hinduism for Indians. But Christianity is not just one phase of human opinion. Its whole significance depends upon its claim to be absolute and final. If that quality is denied to it, it sinks at once to the level of any human speculation or aspiration, and ceases to be the faith for which the martyrs have died.

There is nothing in this claim hostile to that belief in perpetual development which is so dear to the mind of the present generation. That for which finality is claimed is not a system of thought or a code of ethics ; it is a personal life. In the understanding of that life and in the application of its spirit and principles to every kind of problem there is room for strictly endless development. But if Christ was and is what Christians believe Him to be, it certainly follows that there can be no future revelation by which He could possibly be superseded ; in just the same way the multiplication table cannot be superseded, but this is not regarded as a hindrance to the development of mathematical science.

But while this claim to finality leaves ample room for progress and development, it leaves none, as the multiplication table leaves none, for any notion that

it may be the right belief for some and not for others. The Gospel is not first and foremost a medicine to heal ourselves, adapted to some maladies and not to others. It is first and foremost Truth, and is efficacious as medicine for men's souls only in proportion as it is accepted as Truth. And if it is Truth, then very plainly it is the Truth which it is most important for men to know. It is because it is the Truth and in it Reality is expressed that to conform to it is to build one's house upon the rock.

If all this is accepted, the case for evangelization needs no further advocacy. Least of all can Christians, who know this Truth, suppose that they can escape the obligation to impart it to others. But there are further grounds to be given, going nearer to the impulsive roots of human action.

It is in the very nature of Christianity that truly to possess it inevitably leads to passing it on. For in it God's greatest gift to us is the gift of Himself in the Holy Spirit; but in it He reveals Himself as Love, such love as is shown in the Life and Death of Jesus Christ. But love is self-giving; therefore to receive that gift and merely keep it to ourselves is impossible; if we are not passing it on, that is proof that we have not received it. The very essence of the gift, as of God who gives it, is the energy of self-giving to the point of self-sacrifice. If we know what the word truly implies we must see that 'Christian' and 'missionary' are synonymous terms.

Yet, once more, we know that the love of Christ goes out to all men as to ourselves; and, being love, it yearns for love in answer. If we have any understanding at all of the love of God in Christ, we must devote ourselves to the appeasement of the hunger in His heart for those to whom we have not yet

carried the knowledge of that love, that He may see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied.

No degree of appreciation of noble qualities in other religions can in the least degree diminish the sense of obligation in Christians to carry the Gospel through the world, if they have any true understanding of what the Gospel is.

V

As a matter of fact evidence comes in from every side to show that, for all their noble qualities, the other religions are falling before the onset of that secular view of life which modern civilization so easily induces. Christianity is called upon to face the same danger, and it may appear presumptuous to assume that Christianity can defeat it. But there are certain considerations which go far toward removing that appearance.

In the first place, Christianity finds itself at home with the new, but now universal, belief that progress is a normal concomitant of life. It is wholesome to realize how novel that belief really is. For many centuries the external conditions of life remained unaltered, and it was a common assumption that stability of institutions was a sign of social health. In England, where practical exigencies are always allowed to triumph over theoretical convictions, change went on in fact while constancy was applauded as a principle. In France, the river of change was held back until 1789, when it broke its banks and flooded all Europe. As late as 1832 Lord Grey commended the first English Reform Bill to the House of Commons by the plea that it would be a

final settlement of the franchise question. Of course it was nothing of the kind, and no politician would dream of advancing such a plea to-day. The change is profound: our grandfathers assumed constancy and tinkered with adjustments; we assume change and only try to direct it.

To most religions this atmosphere of constant change is very menacing, but need not be so to Christianity. For this is one of the distinctive characteristics of Christianity, that whereas all other religions have tended to stereotype the conditions in which they originated, because only in those conditions could their requirements be obeyed, Christianity has been a fermenting principle of change in every society into which it has come. This is primarily because it is centred not upon a formula but upon a Person, and its regulative principle is not a code but a Spirit. Moreover, it has stood committed to a doctrine of progress ever since our Lord Himself asserted the divine authority of the Mosaic Law and yet superseded it with another, and St Paul, following where his Master led, asserted again the divine authority of that Law and declared it abrogated. To attribute divine authority to something for one period and deny it for another is to presuppose change and progress as part of the divine purpose. We have already seen that this is in no way incompatible with certain forms of constancy; in fact the making of actual progress entirely depends on the constancy of direction. If the direction is always being changed, no progress can be made at all; constancy of direction for movement is the polar opposite of unchangeableness. This is the constancy that the Gospel gives us. Our starting-point is fixed; it is the creative love of God. Our goal is

fixed ; it is the realized Kingdom of God. And our way is fixed ; it is found in Him who said, ' I am the Way.'

In the second place, we may gain encouragement from recognition of the source of this great change in men's outlook. It comes directly from the constant change in actual conditions, but that comes itself from the advance of natural science. It is a plain fact of history that the great advance of natural science has taken place in Christendom and not outside it. It may be rash to argue, as some students of the subject have done, that science is itself a fruit of Christianity, but it may be safely asserted that it can never spontaneously grow up in regions where the ruling principle of the universe is believed to be either capricious or hostile, and when it is imported into those regions it is bound to undermine such a belief. There is a kinship between the scientific impulse and the essential elements in Christianity which explains how science could win its triumphs in Christendom, and at least inspires a hope that it will not destroy but strengthen Christian faith.

But the first impact of natural science upon a civilization is liable to result in materialism. The immensely increased control over nature makes men feel independent of any higher power, and the concentration on material goods and the processes of producing them and distributing them diverts attention from spiritual interests. Now this urgent materialism of a scientific civilization is too powerful to be merely repressed ; it may be controlled or sublimated (as the current jargon has it), but not repressed. And it cannot be controlled by any religion which either is immersed in the material or turns its back upon it. What is the Hindu reformer

to do with steam and electricity? His religion says they are part of the illusion of life; it will not help him to control them. He may try to neglect them, as Mr Gandhi does, but they will be too strong for him. Or he may keep his religion in one compartment and his political or social action in another; and then the compartment allocated to religion will shrink while the other expands. What is wanted is a religion for which matter is the proper vehicle of spirit, and spirit is recognized to act by directing matter; and Christianity alone answers to that description. Its central affirmation is that 'the Word was made flesh.' It is the most materialistic of all higher religions, for while they attain to spirituality by turning away from matter, it expresses its spirituality by dominating matter. After all the only purely spiritual things in the world are good intentions; and we all know where that road leads which is paved by them. For Christianity matter exists to be the vehicle of spirit, and is only fulfilling its true function when it is that; but spirit realizes itself by controlling matter and only expresses itself so far as it does that. Taught by the Incarnation, the Christian finds all the universe a Sacrament, which finds its focal expression in the Word made flesh.

This carries with it the obligations not only of personal self-control but of subduing the whole material order of society to the Spirit of Christ. To make what is now the sphere of ruthless competition an expression of true fellowship is the great need of the whole civilized world. That aspiration so entirely coheres with the Christian Gospel as to be almost part of it. Here, too, the Gospel gives us the direction in which progress must be made.

Yet once more, the political discovery of the modern world is democracy, and the moral root of democracy is respect for individual personality. But the very notion of personality as we conceive it to-day is a product of Christianity. Democracy is a child of the Gospel. And it desperately needs the Gospel to keep it wholesome ; for it is liable to two perversions. One of these is that chaotic licence, for which Plato denounces democracy. If the true principle that all personality is sacred is held without regard to the balancing principle that we are all members one of another, it leads to moral and social chaos ; in Christianity these two principles are held in an even balance. But modern democracy is still more likely to suffer from the other perversion. Its inevitable machinery of majorities and mass-meetings tends to give a most unwholesome development to the herd-instinct ; thus the majority becomes tyrannous, and individuality is crushed. The only sound reason for giving authority to a majority is that this is the only way to give full weight to the personal quality in every citizen ; therefore the right of the majority to govern is inseparable from the right of the minority to hold its own convictions ; and democracy is only true to itself when it has the most delicate sensitiveness of conscience about the rights of minorities. It is under perpetual temptation to trample on them ; only if its spiritual roots—belief in human brotherhood under God's Fatherhood—are strong is there any hope of its resisting them. What we need is independence of thought and the spirit of fellowship ; what modern urbanized civilization is creating is herd-mentality with a spirit of pugnacity. This perversion will only be cured by a power more compelling than the influence of social environment

—by a religion, therefore. But it must be a religion in which the root principle of democracy is strong.

May we not, then, sum up the case for evangelization in this way?—Christians are bound by the very nature of their faith to propagate it: the whole world demonstrably needs what Christianity can alone, or in a unique degree, supply. God's gift answers man's need. That it should be so is evidence of the authenticity of the gift. But in answering it the gift does more than satisfy it. For below these temporal conditions, the relation of which to the Gospel we have been considering, there is the unchanging need of man for the Eternal God and for the redemption by which alone he can be brought into the divine fellowship. This unchanging need the Gospel ever satisfies. That it will always do so we have no doubt, though we can give no proof. 'We speak that we do know and bear witness of that we have seen.'