

## REASON, TRADITION, AND "PURE" RELIGION.

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HISTORIANS, and especially students of religious and theological movements, are familiar with the apparently inevitable tendency to corruption and attenuation, or, more accurately, to reversion and reaction, in all great religious and ethical movements. The Founders teach revolutionary doctrines, and just because they are radical and original they challenge attention and attract converts by the thousand or the million. Novelty, boldness, daring, enthusiasm, faith, inspiration, self-sacrifice, these are the elements which give to a new religion its power over minds, hearts and imaginations. The world, alas, is always full of evil, injustice, maladjustment, bitterness. The victims of these conditions are only too ready to receive "glad tidings"—hope, reassurance, the promise of a new heaven and new earth. Discontent, of course, may be spiritual, and the comfortable, prosperous and dominating elements of a society not infrequently throw up rare individuals who can find no peace or happiness in the privileged and enviable position in which they find themselves. Christianity was slurringly called by Nietzsche a "slave religion" and its ethics he likewise called "slave ethics", but while Christianity did appeal first and principally to the disinherited, the downtrodden, the poor and lowly, it did not wholly fail to arouse the interest and devotion of men and women of the aristocratic and wealthy circles. Such disciples had their own peculiar grievances, anxieties and quarrels with the social and moral atmosphere of their time. Their still small voice protested against tyranny, wrong, cruelty and inhumanity. We may now distinguish between their altruism and the egoism of their inferiors, whose woes were more material; but the fact remains that they were not much happier than the others and the new gospel of brotherhood and equality satisfied their moral craving and longing.

Thus, to repeat, a new religion spreads and conquers by virtue of the startling and really revolutionary doctrines its founder proclaims, often at grave risk and cost, and by virtue of the striking contrast those doctrines present to the traditions and stereotyped beliefs of the community. But the converts, as they multiply and in turn seek to make fresh converts, unavoidably dilute, corrupt and misinterpret the doctrines and sayings of the founder. This process is easily explicable, and history illustrates it superabundantly.

This is why we so often hear and read of movements "back to——". In philosophy there are movements "back to Kant" or "back to Plato." In economics there are movements back to Adam Smith and Ricardo, the founders of classical political economy. In American politics we are often exhorted to revert to "the Constitution" or "the teachings of the Fathers." In religion there are sects or schools that, in so-called Christian communities, preach a return to Jesus and his own simple injunctions and principles. In other communities there are movements respectively known as the back to Mohammed, back to Buddha, or Gautama rather, and back to Confucius movements.

All this signifies that now and then a disciple of exceptional moral earnestness, or of exceptional vision and intellectual power, arises who realizes how the religion or philosophy he professes has been overlaid and conventionalized and distorted, and who would brush all these cobwebs and artificialities aside with a gesture of impatience and contempt. The fate of such conservative-radical reformers is not of the kind that generates enthusiasm in observers and would-be followers. The attempts to "go back" seldom succeed, even partially. But it is creditable to human conscience and mind that they continue to be made, despite disappointment and failure.

Just now, by reason of the lessons of the world war, or of its disillusioning aftermath, much is said concerning the need of rehabilitation and reclamation of civilized man by and through a return to genuine and primitive Christianity. True, we are told that many of the masterful leaders of modern nations are not Christians, whatever their professions may be, have no faith in Christian teaching, but rather despise and ignore it, and that, therefore, it is idle to agitate a return to Christ and the application to our problems of the gospel of Jesus—Jesus, the carpenter, the itinerant preacher, the dreamer and advocate of non-resistance. But the question is not

what this or that group, educated or miseducated in a particular school, living in a narrow and isolated sphere, thinks about genuine Christian teaching and its practicability. The question is, What does the average person in the so-called Christian world think of that teaching, its real meaning, its implications, its practicability?

If we are to revert to Christ, or to Gautama, or to Confucius, it is very important indeed to ascertain just what that return would mean to the average person, or the average body of persons, in a modern community, in terms of life, conduct, human relations and human practices.

Vague generalities will not avail. Pious wishes and sentimental exhortations will not answer. We must clear our minds of cant and be candid with ourselves. What does the formula, "Back to essential Christian teaching", involve in terms of industrial, social, political and other activities? Not to face this question is to betray intellectual and moral insincerity.

One point is absolutely clear at the start: To go back to Christ is to study earnestly and critically His own words and injunctions. We have no other source of information worthy of a moment's consideration. We have to determine what Christ said, what He meant, and what he left to the common sense and reasoning of His followers. His terms have to be interpreted in accordance with reasonable canons of interpretation. We cannot accept that which pleases us in His teaching and reject that which we deem impossible by pretending to interpret His words when, as a matter of fact, we quite obviously misinterpret them.

Now, how are we to decide what is essential, basic and irreducible in Christ's teaching? He used metaphor, imagery, fable and symbolism very freely, and many of his parables are eloquent, significant and beautiful. A few examples will suffice here: The parable of the two foundations; that of the sower; that of the grain of mustard; that of the little child; that of the marriage feast; that of the fig tree; that of the garment and the bottles; that of the creditor and two debtors.

But can we apply these fine things to problems of economics, politics, government, social organization, family life, recreation and esthetics? We cannot, for they are too abstract, too general, too vague or too subtle. We require more positive, explicit, concrete recommendations, more intelligible "middle principles", plainer mandates and directions.

Do we find such in the words attributed to Christ by the gos-

pels? We certainly do. Beyond all question, the essentials of Christian teaching are contained and imbedded in the following commandments, injunctions and "sayings":

"Love one another".

"Love thy neighbor as thyself".

"Love your enemies".

"Do good to those that hate you".

"Judge, not, condemn not, forgive".

"Resist not evil".

"Take no thought for your life".

If the foregoing quotations do not embody essential Christianity, there is no such thing as essential Christianity.

We are told by some scholars and commentators that Jesus addressed Himself only to a certain generation, to a certain *milieu*, and to a certain particular set of conditions. We are asked to bear in mind that He preached to an agricultural and primitive people, or tribe, and, further, that He believed the end of the world to be nigh. We are told that what He said to the Jews and Romans and others within his purview over nineteen centuries ago cannot be rationally supposed to apply literally to the advanced industrial populations of the present time, to a state of civilization characterized by trusts, corporations, wireless communications, cables and ocean liners, international markets, world credit facilities, federal republics, newspapers, insurance systems, investments in securities, and the like.

That the sayings of Jesus must be read and interpreted in the light of his time, environment, place and all else that these terms connote, is perfectly true. But it assuredly does not follow that the commandments and sayings of Jesus are without relevancy or applicability to modern conditions and ways of life, for to make this assertion is to renounce and repudiate Christianity altogether as a system of general and eternal truth. It is to assert that Christianity has no vital message and no significance for our day and society.

If, then, Christianity *is* applicable and relevant today, how are the injunctions just quoted to be applied? We must acknowledge that we violate every one of them in our daily practice. We do not love our neighbor as ourselves. We do not love our enemies. We judge and condemn. We resist and fight evil in a hundred forms. We take thought for our life and esteem that conduct a virtue. We

preach foresight, thrift, saving, insurance. We maintain court and jails and penitentiaries. We punish crime.

If to return to essential Christianity means to abolish all these evolved institutions, to renounce our habits and practices regardless of their reasonableness and wisdom, simply and solely because they *appear* to be repugnant to Christ's teaching, then, it is to be feared, such a return is absolutely impossible and unthinkable.

There remains but one possible alternative. Reason must be applied to Christian doctrines and traditions, and literal interpretation must give way to interpretations consonant at once with modern science and with the spirit and intent of the teachings in question.

We have the right to say that Christianity as taught by Jesus is an ideal—an ideal to be realized gradually and slowly. We may say that the sincere Christian is bound only to square his conduct, and preach and demand the squaring of social conduct generally, with the principles of brotherhood, solidarity, service, mutualism and loving kindness. If, for example, we punish crime, the Christian may ask us to do away with cruel and vindictive penalties, with the death sentence, with solitary confinement, with idleness in prison or like atrocities and barbarities. He may ask us to convert jails into industrial workshops and truly correctional institutions. This policy would not refrain from resisting evil, but it would deal humanely and thoughtfully with evil and eliminate malice and hatred from discipline. Again, in insisting upon justice as a foundation and adding thereto negative and positive beneficence—acts of kindness, generosity and forgiveness, the Christian has the right to claim that he is living up, as far as possible, to the spirit and essence of Christian teaching.

So far, it may be assumed, there is little room for controversy. But in the great sphere of industrial relations, what does the spirit or the essence of Christian teaching require of the nominally Christian community? This is a difficult question—one not to be disposed of by fallacious, paradoxical and rhetorical phrases.

We are told that the consistent Christians must become Socialists—Fabian, constructive, pacific Socialists, of course, not revolutionary and destructive ones. Bernard Shaw has solemnly argued that if you become a collectivist and do away with capitalism and private enterprise, with competition and individualism, you live up to Jesus' injunction against taking thought for your life. The socialist state takes thought, runs the argument, but the individual is relieved

of that burden. The individual trusts Providence, but the State keeps its powder dry, as it were, creates and saves wealth, provides pensions and insurance, and conserves the life, health and peace of all its members. This is a strange and clumsy evasion, a transparent trick. If it is un-Christian for individuals to take thought of their life, to plan and save and accumulate, then it is just as sinful for the state, the body collective, to do the same things. If Jesus had intended to preach and teach socialism, he would have done so in unmistakable terms. We would have drawn the distinction made by Mr. Shaw and not left its discovery to chance. Mr. Shaw is guilty of levity when he argues that the way to "try" Christianity is to establish the socialist state.

Moreover, what he says for Fabian Socialism might be said—indeed has been said—for Communism, for syndicalism, for Guild Socialism, for Single-Taxism. Any reformer who is convinced he has a cure-all, an ideal scheme of social organization, a certain road to freedom, harmony and well-being, is entitled to claim that society, by adopting *his* ideas, would become essentially Christian. And since there are several schools of radical reform, and since each school is as sincere and confident as any other, who is to decide which of them is sound, right, scientific and therefore Christian? Each individual must decide this matter for himself. Hence the reformer who affirms and protests that he is merely preaching Christian doctrines adds absolutely to his case. He merely makes the assertion that his scheme, if practical and workable, would bring happiness, solidarity and peace to the world. The assertion needs precisely the same kind, quality and amount of proof as his central claim does—the claim that his scheme *is* workable, just and reasonable.

Nay, even the earnest and high-minded defender of the existing social and economic system is entitled to assert that he is a true and consistent Christian, provided he is convinced that no better system has yet been proposed, and that fundamental change—though not, of course, minor improvements in a hundred directions—would be detrimental and disastrous to society, including the poor and the weak. A man is not un-Christian because he believes that Socialism is impracticable and undesirable. He is not un-Christian because he believes that the present economic system, with all its faults, needs no radical alterations.

Only those are un-Christian or anti-Christian who deliberately or recklessly do harm, inflict suffering, sweat and rob and plunder

their fellows, and resist such changes as are manifestly proper, reasonable and human.

The hard heart, the indifferent attitude, the denial of social solidarity, of responsibility, of duty to one's fellows—these things are un-Christian or anti-Christian. Differences of opinion regarding private property, capitalism, competition, wage relations, forms of social co-ordination and co-operation lie wholly outside the fields of Christian teaching. They are scientific and methodological differences. They concern ways and means, not the goal, the ideal.

In other words, Religion only says, Be just, Upright, Pure and Humble. It cannot undertake to translate these terms into concrete proposals respecting wage standards, rates of interest, scales of rent and profit, exact forms of industrial organization. Whatsoever promotes justice, amity, concord and peace is consonant with religious teaching. Whatsoever makes for friction, suspicion, hatred and injustice is irreligious. The contribution religion, even that of pure Christianity, or pure Buddhism, may make is wholly moral and emotional. It can and does strengthen *the desire* to seek and apply righteousness. It makes one ashamed of callousness and indifference. It energizes and inspires. It stirs and disturbs. It destroys the false peace that is based on wrong and blindness. But it cannot supplant reason, science, painstaking research and calm analysis. The problems of today must be solved by science and by open-minded experiments in social and political "laboratories". The determination to seek and work out solutions is, however, dependent less on self-interest, on short-run considerations of expediency, than on good will, the conscious recognition of the duty and blessing of service and helpfulness. Hence the value of the ethical and the religious motive. Hence the need of moral and emotional culture. Hence the legitimacy of the appeal for a return to essential and simple teachings of the great founders of religious and ethical systems which time and human error have so lamentably perverted and distorted. Recalling Matthew Arnold's definition of religion, "ethics touched with emotion", it is necessary to add that ethics based on mere and sheer self-interest will inspire no emotion. The emotion can only be called forth and perpetually renewed by the contemplation of the sublime, the mysterious, the eternal and the beautiful, and by pondering on the place and mission of moral man, with his marvelous endowments, in the cosmic scheme. In invoking pure and undefiled religious principles, let us make sure that reason and conscience alike accompany us on our pilgrimage.