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PACIFIC COAST THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION GROUP
What is Essential in the Christian Religion?

- CHRISTIANITY AS IDEA AND AS EVENT

By
D. Elton Trueblood, 1900-
I.

One of the most striking developments in theological thought which has come in the last generation is that which concerns the relationship of the Christian religion to the process of history. During the first part of the present century the dominant conception among thoughtful Christians was one which was related to history only incidentally. Just as modern chemistry can be treated as a finished system, the truth of which is independent of the dark and checkered history of this science, so a spiritual religion might, it was believed, also be considered. One of the most interesting expressions of this mood is to be found in the words of Lord Gifford upon the institution of what may be truly called the most distinguished lectureship in the world.

Lord Gifford hoped that his lecturers would treat the subject of natural theology "without reference to or reliance on any supposed special, exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation." Natural theology could be considered, Lord Gifford supposed, as a science consisting of truths reached altogether independently of an historical religion. Accordingly the lecturers were supposed to treat their subject just as they would treat of "astronomy or chemistry," but it is well known that they have had great difficulty in doing this.

Though the foundation established in the Gifford Lectures concerned natural theology as a whole and not Christian theology, there was a strong tendency to regard Christian theology in the same light. Christianity was, it seemed, only a name for a purified high religion of the spirit, shared by peoples of many times and places, and not necessarily tied to events which took place in Palestine. Indeed, it might as well be built upon Chinese or Indian culture rather than the Hebraic and Hellenic. In other words, it was essentially idea. By saying it was idea we do not mean to suggest that the conception was wholly intellectual, shutting out the appeal to religious experience. We mean, rather that both the intellectual formulation and the experience were conceived as independent of temporal considerations. On this basis, we might neglect the slow or rapid stages by which the gospel came, we might eliminate from our survey all events between the departure of Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees and the arrival of delegates at Madras. Christianity would then be a high, catholic, non-local religion, which could be entered into on its own merits and without any attention to its development. The series of events would be incidental. If the purpose of our journey is to reach the mountain top, so the argument runs, why should we concern ourselves greatly with the tortuous path by which we reach it.

The dominance of this conception is striking evidence of the influence of ideas derived from natural science. The conception of the Christian faith just suggested is strictly parallel to the dominant conception of physics or chemistry. And it is the recognition of this fact which helps us to free our minds of the conception. The change in emphasis has come about partly through a recognition that theology, however scientific it may become, is, in fact, strikingly different from the natural sciences. It differs from them, not because it depends upon authority, whereas they depend

upon facts, for authority plays an enormous part in natural science and fact plays an enormous part in religion, but because of a characteristic shared by theology with other humanistic disciplines, the characteristic of dependence upon historical processes. Perhaps no theologian has expressed this as clearly as has William Temple.

It is no accident that in our colleges we give much attention to the History of Philosophy, the History of Religion, the History of Art, but little attention to the History of Science. This is not because the history of science is not interesting, but because it is not essential, whereas, in the consideration of all phases of spiritual life, it is strictly essential. Science can be handled in temporal cross sections. The freshman can begin his course in natural science without any historical preparation and even such historical references as occur are largely incidental. Boyle's law could be given a number as well as a name, and it is hardly important to know that Boyle lived in the seventeenth century. The only significant question is the present truth and usefulness of the law.

I am glad to record my gratitude to my beloved teacher, Professor Lovejoy, for his insistence that philosophy cannot be divorced from the history of philosophy. He is fond of saying that you cannot philosophize *in vacuo*. The history of reflective thought, as he shows in his introduction to his *Carus Lectures*, is really a great and sustained conversation, but a conversation in which we help one another to arrive at some specific conclusions.

Our efforts to present either philosophy or religion in the cross section, scientific manner are never completely successful. We give courses called "Introduction to Philosophy", arranged by problems rather than by chronology, but we find ourselves showing how Plato or Descartes dealt with each problem. This is even more true in religion, where we cannot avoid the relapse into narrative. Donald Hankey's The Lord of all Good Life, still moves students in a striking way. Sooner or later we must illustrate the point in question by telling how God dealt with men in former times. The gospel song, "Tell me the old, old story," points to what is really inescapable. Religion as mere speculation is poor and this, because it is abstract.

Science has a history, in the sense that there is a crude scaffolding by which the scientific enterprise has been able to arrive at its present eminence, but the point is that, having arrived, it can neglect the scaffolding or even kick it away, but, in the life of the spirit, the scaffolding is an integral part of the structure.

This significant difference between natural science on the one hand, and religion or any other humanistic discipline on the other, arises from the fact that natural science is abstract whereas the spiritual life is always concrete. The reason why the scientist can afford to neglect the historical context of a discovery is that he has drawn out all aspects of reality except one. His fundamental task is to find laws and relations which are universally valid because they are considered in isolation. Even individuals are nothing but examples. Religion, on the other hand, cannot be abstract, it cannot isolate; it must see men in the full concreteness of their stations. A religious truth, then, is not something that can be symbolized by equations on a blackboard, the most bloodless things conceivable, but is something that can only be demonstrated in the process of living in society and in history. The Christian faith, in its emphasis on the incarnation, has always held this conviction implicitly, but the contrast with natural science, available in our day, helps this conviction to become fully explicit.

The effort to consider theology after the fashion of natural science as expressed by Lord Gifford's will, represents the triumph of the Hegelian conception of Christianity. In the Hegelian system, Christianity is presented as true, in that it is the logical outcome of any truly reflective thought. Any reflective person, alert to the facts of the world would arrive eventually at the notion of God, of the trinity, and of human sonship. Its truth is inherent and was sure to be reached sooner or later. Those who have shared in its history have been tools of the dialectical process.

But if we take Hegel seriously we see that the notion of Christianity as history is itself a thesis in unstable equilibrium and we expect an antithesis.

The Gifford Lectures have demonstrated in a most interesting manner some of this dialectic. Lord Gifford's thesis, honestly considered and examined at its basis, has demonstrated its own insufficiency and has led us over to its antithesis. Lord Gifford, looking down from heaven, must have been surprised to find Karl Barth lecturing in Scotland. We are now in this second dialectical moment, perhaps ushered in by Professor Webb's Lectures of 1918, in which there are voices on every hand declaring that Christianity is more an event than an idea. It is, they say, something which happened in Palestine.

We cannot reasonably expect to remain in this second phase of the dialectic movement, since it is essentially a negative one, a wholesome corrective. What is to be the synthesis? The purpose of this brief paper is to suggest certain pertinent considerations which seem to bear on the question, and, in recognition of which it is easier to see what the third phase of the dialectical movement may be. Undoubtedly we shall agree in the end that Christianity is both idea and history, but the important question is the precise manner in which the factors are combined. My task is to point out some of the problems, leaving the conclusion both brief and tentative in order to facilitate discussion.

II.

The first consideration to note is that there is no possible return to the thesis. In this, as in so many other areas of reflection, we can accept something of Hegel's method while rejecting his major conclusions. We must reject the notion of Christianity as mere idea, not only because this represents an uncritical approximation of the mood of natural science, but also because this interpretation does not do justice to the actual data of Christianity. Certainly it is clear that the chief elements of Christianity arose in critical times, having a peculiar character.

It is interesting to imagine what a purely speculative religion would be like. Some creative mind might draw up a plan of a good religion, as other minds have drawn up plans of an ideal commonwealth. This could be studied as a finished product and accepted. This religion would contain the notion that God is objectively real, that he is spiritual in nature, and that He loves men as a good father loves his sons and daughters. Moreover He continually reaches out to men by means of His eternal Word and has made all hearts restless until they rest in Him. This religion might be accurately termed a gospel, since it would be good news about God and man. It would involve the idea that men could have a partial, but nevertheless genuine and trustworthy knowledge of the Living God, irrespective of their race or tradition, for God has not left any person without an inner witness. It would follow that we should

-14-

hail men as brothers all over the world, since all are children of a common father. We should fight for the elimination of war and of poverty because these tend to disfigure and obscure "that of God in every man." A whole social gospel can be built on the notion of a divine seed in all men.

A religion so understood would be as independent of geography as history. It would make no difference to such a religion if the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea were a bit larger and the buffer state between competing lands and ideologies, the land of Palestine, had never been a land at all. Such a religion would not need any reference to a chosen people, to the patriarchs, or to the prophets of Israel. It would be a religion of universal scope and universal appeal.

If some gifted thinker had developed such a religion, and written a book about it, it would have been a good religion. Powerful arguments could be used to support its chief contentions, especially those familiar to students of natural theology, and the central experience of the enduring love of God could be verified in the experience of countless individual Christians. Such a religion might be true in its chief tenets, even if the stories about the origin of Christianity were all false.

Now we may be practically certain that nothing of the kind ever took place. This is not the way religion in general arises, and assuredly it is not the way Christianity arose. Just because religious insight comes to minds in great bursts, it does not follow that a religion can be made out of whole cloth. The prophets of Israel were part of a tradition, and a good tradition, even when they revolted against certain aspects of it. Christ's teachings came as an antidote to the decayed prophetic movement just as that movement had come as an antidote to a decayed emphasis on worship. But there is no suggestion of any important insight appearing in a man who sits down and says to himself, I will now construct a religion out of whole cloth. The few efforts of this kind which we know are feeble indeed. Great religious insight comes not in a cool hour, but in fierce objection to abuses. It comes not with equilibrium; but with counter-thrust.

It has occurred to several persons to suppose that Jesus never existed, that Christianity is an artificial synthesis, but the facts are very hard to explain on this basis. The mind that could create the story would be as miraculous as the incarnation itself and the amazing burst of new life involved in the spread of Christianity would be unexplained. H.G. Wood is speaking for many sober historical scholars when he says:

"Those who have not entered far into the laborious inquiry may pretend that the historicity of Jesus is an open question. For me to adopt such a pretense would be sheer intellectual dishonesty. I know I must, as an honest man, reckon with Jesus as a factor in history. I cannot rightly ignore or evade the challenge of His story." ¹

In Christianity we are not concerned so much with what might have been, but with what was. It is not a dream, but is rooted in the actual. Christianity arose in a stream of experience of a race of men who had been the recipients of a peculiar and precious revelation. The beginnings of the religion of Israel we now recognize

1. H. G. Wood, Christianity and the Nature of History, p. xxxiii.

as similar to the early religions of many other peoples, but they later came to see, in remarkable stages, the notion that God is spiritual, that He is universal, and that His requirements are ethical in nature. The greatest step came in the rise of the prophetic movement.

Christianity belonged to this movement in a particular time and place and is hardly conceivable in any other. The incarnation occurred in this particular setting at the fullness of time. In view of the untenability of the Christ-myth theory, and in view of the closeness of Christ to a particular background, we are safe in saying that Christianity is not, never has been, and can never be, mere idea.

How truly it involved the element of narrative in New Testament time is demonstrated by a consideration of the method of evangelism shown in the book of Acts. Once, at least, in the course of his visit to Athens, St. Paul sought to deal with the gospel as idea, but his more common method seems to have been that demonstrated at Antioch, in which he told the familiar story of God's dealings with his people - the life in Egypt, the Exodus, the new land, the Captivity, the Baptist, Jesus Christ. The story alone seems to have been the chief persuasion and the most effective of the two methods.

An illustration from Christian history with which I am very familiar is found in the Society of Friends. Quakerism has become at times virtual deism, with its doctrine of the light which shines in all, but it has never been spiritually and morally productive except when this has been supplemented by the message of the historical Jesus.

III.

In the second place, we cannot be satisfied with the antithesis, the interpretation of Christianity as mere event. Here three particular problems arise, the problem of meaning, the problem of agreement, and the problem of divine fairness.

a. The problem of meaning is apparent when we realize that a mere event is really very close to nothing at all. It is reported to us, on excellent authority, that Dr. Johnson wrote a letter to Mrs. Thrale on May 1, 1780, while that good lady and her husband were at Bath, but it is a fact that makes very little difference. In and of itself it is nothing. An event in history is not important unless it connects significantly with other events and, somehow, matches them. But this is only possible if there is a level of idea to which the historical event points. This is another way of saying that religion must be concerned with truth as well as facts and events.

The mere fact that Christ was born in Bethlehem is, as mere fact, of little value. Even the fact that Christ taught, or that Christ died has no religious value until interpreted. The essence of Christianity does not consist in the fact that a person in Palestine worked wonders or even that this person rose from the dead. There have been many wonder workers. The power of the Christian faith begins to appear only when these events are matched by a sympathetic response on the part of men who may live at any time or place. It was Christ who said that the true shrine was limited neither to this mountain nor to Jerusalem, but was "in spirit and in truth." Just as the idea gains power when it is "rooted in the actual," so an historical event takes on meaning only when it becomes the vehicle of a non-temporal idea. The historical events of Christianity are important because of what they mean.

It is not history, as such, that is important, but a particular history, and when we select one history we are passing out of the category of mere event.

b. The problem of agreement. The problem of the relationship between idea and history in Christianity is closely associated with the problem of universality. To what extent can men enter into Christian experience without any conscious connection with the known events of Christian history?

It is true that, on the highest levels of religious experience, men speak to each other across the chasms of time or of tradition and understand each other. The fundamental agreement in the reports of religious experience, not only within the Christian faith, over many centuries, but between the great religions, has been noted by many careful scholars. This fundamental agreement is one of the chief means by which the believer is able to make an effective answer to the suggestion that all knowledge of God is illusory. If there is substantial agreement in spite of differences in background, it is difficult for the skeptic to discount the reports, for they are strictly parallel to reports about the physical order.

The fundamental agreement has been well expressed by Dr. Inge:

"On all questions about religion there is the most distressing divergency. But the saints do not contradict one another. They all tell the same story. They claim to have had glimpses of the land that is very far off, and they prove that they have been there by bringing back perfectly consistent and harmonious reports of it."

Part of the corroboration of Dr. Inge's statement becomes apparent when we match the words and acts of devotion of men of different religions and of different centuries. Consider, for example, the following and see whether you can locate it.

"And Ho hath many times refreshed my soul in his presence, and given me assurance that I know that estate in which he will never leave me nor suffer me to be drawn from all which Ho has graciously fulfilled; for though various infirmities and temptations beset me, yet my heart cleaveth unto the Lord, in the everlasting bonds that can never be broken."

This was written by a Christian but it seems peculiarly dateless. It tells of an experience that might be possible if Christ had never come in the flesh. It is matched by experiences of a similar nature in various religions. How true this is may be shown convincingly by reading the translations of Indian lyrics which Gandhi made in prison.²

The truth is that many of the features of what we call the Christian religion are found outside that religion. It has long been noted that these were found among individuals who lived before the incarnation and numerous thinkers have referred to Socrates as a Christian before Christ. We know now that some of what we call Christian virtues are found among people who do not call themselves Christians at all.

2. Songs from Prison, 1934. The verso form is provided by John S. Hoyland.

Without the mediation of Christ they seem, sometimes, to arrive at a sense of the love of God similar to that arrived at by those who have the advantage of Christ's mediation. This is true of the purer spirits in each group for, however paths may be separated on the lower levels of experience, they approach one another at the top. The best evidence of this is found in the literature of mysticism. It is difficult to reject the deep truth involved in the words of William Penn when he wrote,

"The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion, and when death has taken off the mask, they will know one another, though the diverse liveries they wear here make them strangers."

It is a deep appreciation of this consideration which, more than anything else, makes it unlikely that the second or negative phase of the dialectical movement is the final one. How can these facts be explained if the first phase of our dialectic is entirely false.

c. The problem of divine fairness is a pertinent consideration. It might also be called "the problem of partiality," a problem generally parallel to the problems of evil. The essence of the problem of evil consists in our moral revulsion at a situation in which the innocent suffer, and the parallel problem consists in our sense of unfairness in making the gospel available to only a few. If Christianity is chiefly a set of events, rather than generalized and catholic idea, certain groups of humans have had an enormous advantage over others. Why should the Jews be chosen? Why should the eastern Mediterranean be so favored? Why should the means of eternal hope and universal salvation be localized? Here the moral character of God is at stake.

The point of this problem becomes still more sharp when we consider the hypothesis of the existence of other sentient and supposedly salvable creatures on other planets or even outside our solar system. If Christianity is solely or chiefly a matter of history, and a history confined to the earth, it is hard to see how other "men" in other sidereal locations are to take advantage of that which is so important for the salvation of their souls. Of course there may not be such creatures, but their existence is a live possibility.

Early in the nineteenth century that influential Scottish divine, Thomas Chalmers, gave a series of addresses on the bearing of "Modern Astronomy" on the Christian Revolution. He freely admitted the possibility of other inhabited worlds and asked how we could know that the Christian dispensation was limited to our planet.

"How do you infidels know that Christianity is set up for the single benefit of this earth and its inhabitants? How are they able to tell us, that if you go to other planets, the person and religion of Jesus are there unknown to them?"

In spite of Chalmers' easy sentence, it is hard to see that this is an adequate answer. Can men be helped by what is more historical event, if they have no knowledge of the event? Unless there is something like the Logos doctrine central to Christianity the problem of unfairness continues in a glaring fashion.

Perhaps this problem of unfairness must remain a problem with no adequate answer.

We can suggest, however, that some unfairness is a necessary price for any real revolution at all. An unhistorical revolution would not be revelation, and if it is historical there must be favored people. In a similar fashion, we believe that if there is to be genuine goodness there must be the possibility of sin and thus the problem of evil is part of the price we pay for real moral experience.

But it remains true that the very existence of this problem renders the second phrase of our dialectical movement unsatisfactory.

IV.

We can expect a synthesis to restate the thesis with less naivete, and with the addition of insights provided by the antithesis. In the end we must see Christianity as high, universal, and, in conception, truly catholic, yet it is never an abstract universal. The love of God is shown in history; it cannot be shown in a textbook, a theorem or an equation. Therefore the story of God's dealing with men and God's revelation to men is paramount, but it is a story that is infinitely repeatable, on a smaller scale. The men of Mars, if there are any, may know that God is always reaching out to men, even by the method of incarnation.

Because of what happened in Palestine we have a suggestion of the kind of event that ought to happen, in measure, wherever there are men. Christianity is ultimately a universal idea because it was first a series of events in history. It is idea because it is objectively true, and thus superior to process, but it is history because it is through the process of events that the truth becomes known.

In conclusion, we see that the contrast between natural science and theology, with which we began, leads to the recognition of a profound paradox. Science has no real classics, in the sense of what is universal in appeal, irrespective of time. There are interesting older books of science, but they are superseded. Religion, however, abounds with classics which are wonderfully dateless. Thus science in its abstraction is limited by the time process, but religion, which boldly admits its concern with temporal events, achieves a real universality and practical independence of time, since the saints do not contradict each other.