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# The Mission of the Church.

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**I**F we are to deepen our insight into the meaning of redemption we must presumably consider what light it throws on the alternative salvations of our time. Of these there are only two that we can concern ourselves with here, salvation by progress and salvation by collective community action. After a few brief remarks about each of these, I shall conclude with some general thoughts on the difficulties of interpretation and relevance which the mission of the Church has to face, and the significance of its world-wide extension.

The jolt given to the general conscience by the dropping of the Atom bomb has been very considerable. This thunder-flash has suddenly and tragically lit up the dark night of men's uncertainties and fears. Issues which have long been discussed in arm-chairs have appeared in the pub. and the local brains trust. But no-one seems quite certain what to think. We dimly perceive that there is no short cut to security; to achieve our goal we may first have to retrace our steps. The usual conclusion is that progress has been altogether too one-sided, and our natural achievements have far outrun our spiritual discretion. This rather obvious reflection is the theme of frequent statements by public men of influence and distinction. No one questions their sincerity; there is no room for mud-slinging between the condemned working for a stay of execution. But the sincerity of our views is, in such a question as this, perhaps not so important as the adequacy of our diagnosis, and it is difficult to perceive just how a comparison between material and spiritual progress lies. We live, as has been frequently emphasised, in an age when much that is best and worst in man is equally manifest and inextricably intermingled. It is our highest aspirations that prevent us from achieving satisfaction, and our most disinterested intellectual endeavours that discover the instruments of our destruction.

The idea of curing the diseases of civilisation by accelerating our moral and spiritual progress is congenial to the modern mind. "Progress" and "planning" are two very characteristic modern conceptions, and "planning for progress" is offered as a formula which will satisfy human needs and provide the technique for its own accomplishment. The mastery of both environment and conduct through knowledge will provide the plan and secure the progress. It is true that the idea of salvation through knowledge has received some rude shocks and most men are uneasily conscious that they are just as liable to be destroyed by it. But these "blank misgivings of the creature" are not admitted into the forefront of consciousness: they hover in the cavernous darkness of our hesitations and fears. Perhaps this is just as well up to a point: if men were too despairingly seized of the real gravity of their predicament the moral and psychological consequences might be serious. Meanwhile we cannot step backwards into a pre-scientific age. Science is anxious, as ever, to

supply the tools of material prosperity, and, indeed, to create the form and temper of moderate and harmonious behaviour. Birth-control and artificial insemination, the adjustment by physical means of the temperament and the basic mental structure, are all within reach. It is the faith of science that by directing and regulating human enterprise and relationships, it can itself meet the challenge which it has created by the abundance and the ambiguity of its instruments.

It would be easy to digress here and enter upon a general discussion of the idea of progress. But that is not necessary for the purpose of this paper. The theological insufficiency and the historical instability of this idea have been critically handled by many writers of different schools. It is sufficient to mention such different approaches as those of Nicholas Berdyaev and Christopher Dawson, or of Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr. It is significant that the idea of progress has been more sceptically treated by the historians than by the scientists, although among the latter there are not lacking many who have given voice to their misgivings. But the fascination of this idea is like the fascination of roulette for the gambler; it affords a last chance for a final throw by which the squandered treasures of civilisation will be recovered for ever—for ever because *this time* man, the gambler, will once and for all abandon more hazardous risks. But we may admit the popular appeal, the real achievements of progress, and pursue our examination of the relation of material progress to spiritual reality.

### I.

The faith of science is essentially progressive rather than teleological. It does not envisage a definite goal to history so much as an indefinitely expanding horizon. The Christian faith is teleological: history moves towards a definite term. History, indeed, allows full play to the idea of progress as a legitimate norm for the self-sufficiency of a culture. But the end which is beyond history alone will give complete meaning to the historical process, and it is a meaning which cannot be wrested by a contemporary insight or secured by the energy of struggle. No expansion of material progress, however genuinely happy or useful, can supply that final standard of judgment without which life fails of its final meaning. If the great disasters are indeed avoided—and God grant that they may be—the deep problems will still be unanswered.

But a warning must be uttered against the light-hearted way in which Christians sometimes dismiss the idea of progress. It is not necessary to "debunk" its legitimate achievements but to realize its limitations and relate its true possibilities to the insights of redemption. If the idea of progress finally lapses from man's consciousness, it may mean that the only hope of dawn has, for many millions of anxious watchers, fled from the midnight. It is easy to say that this is the Church's opportunity, but not unreasonable to question it. Before we assume this confidence we must be clear that what we as Christians expect in and beyond history is intelligible in the tragic moments of man's failure. Otherwise in destroying an inadequate hope we shall only admit a final despair.

But if, in the Christian view, the ultimate worth of progress can only be evaluated in the light of the end, and the end is still hidden from us, it is difficult to find an exact basis for relating the problem of material progress, in any sense except a useful day-to-day approximation, to man's capacity for spiritual progress. The popularity of this fallacy has largely come about through the pre-occupation of much modern thought with the prospects of generally improved conditions, and much modern philosophy with the conception of values. This is inevitable in time of war and of the wholesale change of institutions and relationships. For, in such times, we tend to fix our minds on the objects of the revolution; the means by which we achieve it must be as good as we expediently make them; the original motives are easily lost to view.

Moreover, the hazards of the future are very great. We may see at any time an epidemic of moral and psychological depression sweep over us. If this appears an imprudent speculation, we have only to cast our minds back to 1938 and 1939, when we lived under a psychological strain to which even the declaration of war in a manifestly unprepared state was a relief. What this may mean in the presence of the Atom Bomb, if the international clouds begin to gather, may be imagined. It is, therefore, urgently necessary not to link man's present lot so much to his uncertain prospects as to a principle of permanent confidence.

Now a man can only stand firm in the immediate present and endeavour to do the Will of God in faith and understanding if he knows himself to be the bearer of eternal values, not in virtue of the goal to which he is progressing but because of the fundamental experience from which he derives divine support. Christian was moving, in a sense, towards the Celestial City from the moment he turned from his home, but he was unable to equip himself for the journey or to qualify for the gate of the City until he had left his burden at the Cross. In this sense Christ has redeemed us from the uncertainties of moral progress. Man can stand, in the words of Carlyle, "in the centre of immensities in the conflux of eternities, yet manlike towards God and man," because he knows where his true treasure is laid up. He can move surely along his road aware that he can only see darkly the ultimate meaning of life: that will only be revealed to him at the end. Meanwhile it is sufficient that he should travel on to God and significantly in the knowledge that he has been redeemed and his life is "hid with Christ in God".

This criticism of progress as a goal insufficient in itself to bestow adequate meaning on man's life does not in any sense minimise its due importance, but it implies that it is fundamentally the systematisation of the self-contained drive of a culture. As such, it is constantly apt to acquire exaggerated importance, to exclude more enduring if less glittering purposes and to fail in relating its objectives to its limitations. The Christian presses towards the mark of the prize, but he knows both the source from which he derives his true life and the value of the moment in which he is given truly to live. He redeems the time, knowing that the days are evil.

The real answer to the challenge to produce a spiritual progress to match material progress is that the question is wrongly put. There are no such comparable categories. It is not by pursuing spiritual ideals or moral goals that we can acquire control of our destiny. It is not by elaborate planning that we can guarantee ourselves against insecurity. These are the solutions which a mixed civilisation with secular and religious motivations cannot but pursue. But those who know their heritage are the more blameworthy if they fail to draw on its resources rather than entrust themselves to unknown future hopes and the uncertain struggle, noble enough in itself, to control destiny. The Christian looks back to the redemptive moment when God entered history before he can look forward to the end beyond history itself.

## II.

If our understanding of the redemptive mission of the Church leads to a necessary criticism of the idea of progress it also leads to a re-examination of the place and worth of the individual. At this point, too, we find ourselves at variance with the popular outlook, for, however selfish men are, they do not admit that their outlook is individualistic. Planning for mass welfare and emphasis on community render individualism out-of-date. This would be admirable if it were sensible, but it merely disposes of the problem of individuality by ignoring it. At least, it is as an individual sinner that I apprehend my redemption; there is a point beyond which we cannot communalise the experience of faith, nor can we provide for salvation by planning. It is, of course, said that this is pure selfishness. Mankind is engaged in great collective enterprises. The efforts of the nations are devoted to averting famine and creating plenty. The aspirations of peoples find effective voice only through unions and parties. The collapse of the family and of the neighbourhood has indeed left a void, but it can readily be filled by the idea of community and by the mass amusements which, however, are tragically unable to form a social group. In the face of this, what is the purpose of asserting the position of the individual, selfish and alone, preoccupied to be assured of the salvation of his soul?

If this were as true as it is plausible, it would be as serious as it is false. Let us look at the accusation a little more closely. There is no doubt that a perverted individualism can bring the whole structure of civilisation crashing about our ears. The nature of the individual personality has been illumined by the researches of the psychologists. They have diagnosed its main lesions not merely in terms of frustration, repression and inferiority, but in the equally serious social defects of divided purposes and wasted energies. Such personalities, it is said, must be unified through the pursuit of dominant aims. It would be idle to deny that many persons have found satisfaction in the sense of over-riding purpose that accompanies the effort to achievement. They are free from the "sick fatigue, the languid doubt". But it is also true that this type of character is capable of much mischief. The pursuit of aims, untempered by other restraints, soon hardens into intolerant fanaticism. Of such are the men who

have created havoc in Europe. They are entranced by the great objective, and, once under this fascination, they are whole-hearted enough, they are so whole-hearted that they will remove a world of obstacles by the mere decision that they will have none but those of brute matter and force. Such personalities have no respect for community; they despise any fellowship existing for the sake of the development of its members, and acclaim it only when it furthers their lust of dominion.

An individualism which thus depends for its strength on the energy of its zeal can easily take control and degenerate into a desperate fanaticism. The individual is only defended from his own unbalanced selfishness if his character is moulded not so much by his aims as by his heritage, by the key experience in which he believes, by the Spirit which has entered his mind and soul, and by the type of life in which he seeks to participate. This means that we can only claim an inner unity and discipline for the Christian personality which consciously derives its assurance from its experience of divine redemption. Thus assured, the Christian can expose himself with confidence to the demands of circumstances and of his fellows. He can understand and cope, without misgivings, with a world where all decisions are too often a compromise with relative circumstances, and where a satisfying finality answering to an explicit principle is far rarer than we care to suppose.

This emphasis on individualism does not exempt the Christian from his social obligations as a Christian person. Personality, we are told, is developed by contact with other personalities, and, what is more important, in the conscious effort to understand the riddle of other personalities and the contribution which their peculiar experience has enabled them to offer. The challenge of all this is obvious, and no Christian will hold back from making his contribution to the community. But he will always have a reasonable reservation. He cannot regard a community as being the same as a mechanical juxtaposition of individuals. The first step to a true community is the liberation of the personality from the narrow confines of the unawakened individual, a liberation which takes place as we enter into the awareness of redemption. This greater enrichment is urgently needed in the community movement today. There is a significant measure of difference between a community thus enriched by a prior personal experience of God in its members and an assemblage of individuals pursuing, even with vigour, a common aim.

Where redeemed men and women meet together in the light and through the knowledge of their redemption, is the Christian community or the Church. But here—indeed here, more than elsewhere the same principle must apply. Christians may meet for the pursuit of a specific aim. They do so, for example, in the work of the great missionary societies and home missions. They work to extend the preaching of the Gospel. But if they meet by virtue of their aim, however explicit and useful it may be, they meet on insufficient ground. Their space for breathing, for opening themselves to the winds of God that blow from the dawn of His presence, steady, cool and pure, is so-to-say, cramped and confined. Christians meet in the

Church, in the Christian community, primarily because they have known the reality of redemption; their life and fellowship "date" from there.

We may conclude that there is no certainty of hope in the idea of progress and no assurance of satisfaction in the pursuit of community. Nothing in history has so far occurred to eliminate the need for personal apprehension of redemption. We have now to ask what action the Christian as an individual, or the Church as the church can take to advance the redemptive mission entrusted to them. Here there is a formidable difficulty to be faced. The world of redemption by the Cross and the world of salvation through progress no longer rub shoulders; the attitude of confidence in ends and the attitude of despair of self-achievement are two different things. They have always been sundered by a gulf, but so long as there was some inherence of Christian understanding in society as a whole, there was also some intelligibility of language which, for the rest, mainly required a dictionary of misunderstandings; what is wanted to-day is more akin to a lexicon for translators.

What has happened is fairly clear. The tide of faith has receded and Christians find themselves isolated. It is not only that less tip-service is paid to the externals of Christianity, or even that instructed and practising Christians are fewer, although they probably are. It is rather that a change has come over the western world, and the fading-away of such Christian instinct as our civilisation possessed has been followed by strange consequences. All this has coincided with a situation which is the result of well-recognized movements, the growth of industrialism, the popular press, the spread of education, the extension of communication and the like. If a Christian witness is to be effective in such a world, it has first got to understand it and then the particular meaning of its message in it and for it.

### III.

To rediscover this relevance of meaning is essentially a task of co-operation between the clergy and the laity. It cannot be successfully achieved on the basis of spiritual direction given by the clergy to the laity. The clergy must continue the effort to state the faith in terms of significance to the modern mind. But the layman can help to diagnose the situations in the midst of which he lives. The task of interpretation is beset with particular difficulties in industrialised communities. Many a suburban worker spends all his working hours outside his parish. His framework is not the neighbourhood, but the office or the works, and it is there that he confronts most of his perplexities of human relationships, and most of the challenges to his integrity and judgment.

This is perhaps the place for a comment on the report "Towards the Conversion of England." The chapter dealing with the use of modern methods of publicity has attracted attention, and its findings are the subject of special consideration by a Commission of the Church Assembly. But publicity is not in itself a remedy for the graver diseases. It is not a panacea administered by a universal aunt. It will not create a policy, or repair a situation which needs expert

treatment and the prescription of fundamental remedies. It will explain a difficult, but true, case. It will illustrate an emotional appeal. It will popularise names and features. It will counter and dispel misunderstandings. But it will not of itself reverse a stream of tendency, and there are tensions in the modern mind which it may deepen rather than dissipate. I do not know whether at present the necessary conditions exist for a widespread publicity of evangelism. There is, I think, room for the larger use of the apparatus of explanation, but even this, indeed this above all, must depend on the skill and care brought to bear upon the task of language and interpretation.

To return to the main theme. One important deduction from our analysis of the relation of the Christian faith to the idea of progress must be mentioned here. The mission of the Church among the nations is often defended on the grounds that it has brought enlightenment and progress to backward peoples. It is, indeed, a legitimate cause for rejoicing that it has done so. But the Christian community, living as it does by virtue of faith in the Rock from whence it was hewn, in redemption, is not finally dependent upon the progressiveness of its members. Christian communities must exist among people of vastly different cultures and material standards of living. All who have experience of Jesus Christ stand together in His redemption. The creation of the world-wide Church is one of the really significant developments of the last 100 years, but not, fundamentally, for its contribution to progress, but for its witness to redemption. Here is a movement rooted in the greatest reality of history, but not dependent for its vitality on its immediate framework of place and time, which transcends the bounds of nations and supplies a loyalty stronger than that of national lore or local tradition.

The building-up of this redeemed community has been the great object of endeavour by our missionary societies, and is a genuine justification of their efforts. Other movements are international; a recent example is the World Federation of Trade Unions which has received recognition from the "United Nations". These movements have their constitution and laws, but it would not be inapt to say that they are held together by their progressive aims. The Christian community among the nations maintains its fellowship through the common experience of its members in Christ; its will to progress arises in the first instance from this. It, therefore, claims to refer its existence and message to the appearance amid the nations of God-in-Christ who is above them. In this sense it claims to be something more than merely international.

But the Christian community is moulded by the culture in which it has developed. Christians have not felt attracted by a rootless internationalism, the cosmopolitanism of the *deraciné*. The mere fact that Christianity is a faith for the whole of life means that the Christian is concerned with culture and environment. Indeed, before oecumenism (if that is the word) can contribute decisively to a potent internationalism, which is what many persons earnestly desire, it is arguable that there must be not less, but more, integration between the Church and national cultures. Otherwise the Church will become



the instrument of internationalism at the cost of being torn up from its own soil. It is important for the redemptive mission of the Church to estimate with care its adjustment to local culture. It cannot be done by *a priori* principles, but only on the basis of an assurance of standing in Christ which is really strong and triumphant. It is then possible that the redeemed community can take deep root in any local culture and yet maintain its separation from all that would menace its essential faith.

#### IV.

Much of this paper may be common ground to all sections of the Church. But there are insights into the redemptive mission of the Church that have a special meaning for evangelicals. First among them, to recapitulate, is the significance of the individual. Amid all the talk of community it may well be that we forget the supreme importance of the individual for whom Christ died. To say this is no plea for an exaggerated individualism; it is simply a recognition that no society which ignores the worth of Christian individualism can lay a sound foundation for Christian culture. Man must be brought to realise that the doctrine of progress has to face the stubborn reality of individualism. Collective experience does indeed accumulate; each generation inherits the tools of its fathers and creates its own machines for its sons to improve; each discovery starts from the advanced point of previous enquiry and penetrates further into the mysteries of matter. But individual experience, in the strict sense, dies with the individual and no man can claim better judgment or deeper wisdom, a nobler firmness or a more penetrating subtlety than his remote ancestors. This unique limitation of individualism defies every collective influence which seeks to overcome it. It is the self-limitation which our Lord accepted in accomplishing our redemption. Christians may be pardoned for thinking that unless the conflict between individualism and the community is resolved by bringing both into the obedience of Christ, it will prove insoluble, and civilisation will again collapse under the strain.

Secondly, the evangelical emphasis on the meaning of redemption for the individual is especially relevant to the suffering which recent years have made an almost universal experience. Suffering is above all the tragedy of the individual. The cheer and happiness of life, as many understand them, are enjoyed in community, in the sense that the things that make life tolerable to many are the fruit of collective effort and the labour of generations. But all the embellishments of our existence have abated nothing of the poignancy of bereavement and loneliness of suffering. Man is still compelled to-day to lose his dearest, tomorrow to witness his dreams destroyed by his destiny. That the prizes of collective progress accumulate only renders his inner isolation more intense. The individual can sustain himself against pressure and persecution by the fellowship of his community, but in the actual passage of suffering he is alone. So it is that there are the persons whom all of us know and respect, who go through life with a smile on their lips, but are gnawed by an inner isolation.

It is clear from this paper that I can see no *immediate* relief to the predicament of our day in the redemptive mission of the Church. This mission must ever be pursued, both because it is the manifest privilege and duty of all Christians, and because its message is the open secret which the world sorely needs to apprehend. But, if it is true that we are witnessing the dissolution of our civilisation, it is also true that the religion of redemption which has underlain its noblest endeavours, has ceased to grip the hearts of men. If that is so, it is no weary pessimism, but a reasonable historical estimate, to say that it will be difficult to restore its appeal until the process of dissolution has proceeded further. But we need not suppose that because our civilisation is apparently in decay, the culture that has created and sustained it will be wholly obliterated. It is more likely to survive and revive in whatever civilisation, if any, may succeed ours. Then will be evident the real fruit of the redemptive mission maintained in a day of destruction of faith and dissolution of social bonds. For in that endeavour will be sown the hope of the new dawn. "Long sleeps the summer in the seed," but when at last it brings forth fruit, the hearts of God's people are rejoiced with the joy of harvest.