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# The Cataclysm of Our Time

BY THE REV. CANON M. A. C. WARREN, D.D.

THERE is a point on the road which runs beside the Niagara river from Erie to the Falls, at which it is possible to stand and look upward to a skyline which is a rolling mass of water. Here the mighty river becomes for a short while a roaring cataract before taking its tremendous plunge into the Niagara Gorge. That vast wall of water poised, as it were, in perpetual motion, and coming apparently 'out of the sky', is an awe-inspiring sight. With the rush of the cataract and the thunder of the Falls it is an unforgettable experience. It is also a picture of our time.

The dictionary definition of 'cataclysm' gives us "an overwhelming deluge" and then adds that figuratively it means a "sudden, revolutionary, social or political event which sweeps away old landmarks and introduces violent changes in the structure of society and government". An overwhelming deluge is as good a way of describing the Niagara river rolling into its cataracts as one could find. And that swirling, tumultuous mass of water is a perfect picture of our contemporary world in which revolutionary, social, and political events are sweeping away old landmarks and introducing, sometimes with great suddenness, violent changes in the structure of society and government.

But that is at best a picture. At one critical point the analogy breaks down. We are not detached observers on the road from Erie to Niagara Falls. We are in the very cataract itself. And being in it we are not well placed to distinguish its direction or to discern the pattern of those cross-currents which add to its menacing tumult. That *caveat* is necessary before any attempt is made to understand what is happening in our world.

Nevertheless the attempt to understand must be made. In those cataracts of Niagara there is a cluster of spray-drenched rocks which lift themselves just above the swirling waters. There a drowning man might rest himself, take breath, consider his position, and from there be rescued. It was just such a rock that the prophet Habakkuk climbed as he sought to find some vantage point where, above the sand-laden tempestuous desert-wind, he could breathe, and look out, and listen. The metaphors are different but the experience is the same. He, too, lived through the cataclysm of his time. From his rock he speaks across the ages to us, summoning us to a like committal of faith in Him who rode the whirlwind of those days and sits above the water floods of ours.

## I

In that faith, then, it is possible to try and understand the cataclysm in which we find ourselves. And our first essay in understanding must be to look at mankind with the 'eyes of faith', with the perspective of God, and so to refuse to look at men in the mass. It is when we generalize that we lose faith, that hope becomes dim, and love is paralyzed. There are very few generalizations which, applied to

human beings, are true. The 'average man' does not exist. That is an indispensable part of our act of faith; an act of faith which is a deliberate challenge to those demonic forces at work in our world which are seeking to produce an 'average man'.

If then we look not at men in the mass but at men as we know them, and can love them, it is possible to see the nature of their quest, and some of the highly differentiated ways in which they are seeking to pursue it. In this loving enquiry we may perhaps discover new truth about ourselves.

We are, all of us to-day, in many varied ways, and of whatever race, the end product for the time being of a movement which began in Western Europe in the 13th century, and which historians have called the Renaissance. Strictly speaking that term refers to the rebirth of learning after the 'dark ages' which in Western Europe followed the fall of Rome. By the 13th century a stable political order had begun to emerge and the human spirit, released from the continual struggle for survival, began a new age of exploration. And the object of this exploration was man himself and his world.

Circumstances, historical and geographical, and no intrinsic merit in themselves, determined that the pioneers of this exploration should be Europeans. The Arab conquest of North Africa and South-Eastern Europe, the Mongol invasions of Southern Russia, had combined to cut Europe off from Asia. The new spirit of enquiry drove the European to explore the world in ships. Hence it came that Europe, not Asia, with its far older cultures, occupied the Americas and Australasia and opened up Africa. And in the process the spirit of enquiry was stimulated to a positive riot of inventiveness, which in every sphere of technical skill has given to 'European man' his present predominance. This historical development has determined the pattern of events in every country of the world. It is quite inescapable. That is the justification for claiming, as one clue to understanding our time, that the African who leaves his *shamba* to find work in a mine or a ginnery in order to earn money to pay his taxes; the Middle East peasant who finds his whole life-pattern being remoulded by the exploitation of the oil resources he never knew he possessed; the Indians in Natal, East Africa, and Fiji, and therefore the Indians in India; the Chinese tapping rubber trees in Malaya; the Chinese studying Marxist-Leninism in China; the Japanese factory workers of Tokyo and Hiroshima; all these are no less men of the Renaissance than the Europeans who stayed in Europe or the Europeans who went overseas.

There are still tremendous differences between all these different peoples. But they are all involved in the cataracts of the same Niagara. And the overwhelming nature of the change which has come to them, to some much more suddenly than to others, is that they have discovered themselves to be *individuals* who, in making that discovery, have also found that they have lost any sense of 'belonging'. That is bad enough. To belong nowhere is a lonely business. But in addition they find themselves moving they know not where, having no sense of direction. "Isolated, alone, and afraid" modern man needs some principle of integration. He has discovered so much, but

he cannot make sense of it. Though he does not know it he is searching after that profoundest of all religious experience which Christians understand by the Atonement.

This is not just a convenient generalization such as we have already suggested needs to be treated with suspicion. Rather it would appear to be a common term, to be distinguished under many forms, a clue rather than a conclusion. But if we can discover the common factor we shall have made one big step forward to that understanding which issues in compassion and in sacrificial service. It is at the point of sacrificial service, given and received, that men discover that they do, in fact, belong together, find themselves beginning to feel at-home ; it is when they experience human forgiveness that they know what it is to be at-one, dimly apprehend the possibility of an atonement—find themselves on a rock, are ready to listen to the Gospel.

## II

In this adventure in understanding, which is the necessary preliminary step for any effective evangelism, the Christian must appreciate this common factor of demand and supply, by which a revolution in human thinking, bringing into being the self-contained individual responsible for his own decisions and answerable to no one but himself, has created a desperate sense of isolation, aloneness and fear, which in its turn is leading into a new revolution of escape. It is the comparative study of this revolutionary process and not the comparative study of the old religions of the world which should be the primary concern of the Christian evangelist who is preparing for his share in setting forth the Gospel.

This comparative study will reveal men as being grouped together according to standards of education and occupation even more than by nationality and race. In his reactions to the revolutionary process the educated man of any one race will be much nearer to the educated man of another race, than either will be to the uneducated multitude of his own people. This fact will, in its turn, set up most powerful cross-currents of emotion ; and acute tensions will result when the demands of racial and national loyalty clash with the demands of humanity itself.

In our comparative study one field for research will be that of the more articulate, because the more highly educated, section of mankind. Here the new revolution of escape from 'individualism' is leading to various aspirations towards some kind of atonement. Three such ways of escape can be readily distinguished.

There is the escape into naturalism, whereby man seeks reintegration with nature by becoming " a successful biological adaptation to his environment ". Man, so this view suggests, is at-home only in so far as he is assimilated to the natural order of which he forms a part. Man is what he eats, to put it in its simplest terms ; and he is determined by what he eats, and by the need to propagate his species. Man's margin of manoeuvre is limited by the degree to which he can satisfy his primitive needs : for the rest he is carried along by a " life force " which is blind and irrational. On this view man is not fundamentally a moral being accountable for his own behaviour, but just a highly

complicated expression of the natural order from which he cannot, in any proper sense, be distinguished. The highly sophisticated scientist giving emotional content to this conception in his nature mysticism is one with the Australian Aborigine who has never believed anything else. Both seek atonement by identification with nature.

A second contemporary way of escape for the individual man is to offer him a group loyalty in which he can lose himself. Try as he can he is unable wholly to divest himself of a guilty conscience, of having somehow missed his way to a goal which he feels he ought to be pursuing. For modern man with a conscience Communism offers such a way of escape. At one and the same time it provides a moral alibi for the individual by projecting his own failings on to an historical process of which he is a predetermined part; and also offering him a place in a process of development which is going to produce a paradise on earth. In doing this Communism integrates the individual with society and puts him again into a world of meaning. It is very important for the Christian to understand that this is what Communism is doing, and doing very successfully for a very large number of educated and thoughtful men and women in every country in the world. The appeal of Communism is not only to those in material need. Far and away its greatest contribution and, as far as the Christian world view is concerned, its greatest menace lies in its ability to appeal to "isolated" men in need of community and purpose—to men wanting to be at-one with their fellows.

A third way of escape is that offered by the liberal-humanists, or perhaps more accurately by liberal-humanism, for it is rather an intellectual climate of opinion than a school of prophets which offers this way of escape. Liberal-humanism is the tacit, when not explicit, conviction that man must frankly recognize his complete aloneness in the Universe, accept full responsibility for himself, and live by the light of his own high-mindedness, a high-mindedness which the right kind of education can foster. In spite of everything that has happened in the world in the last twenty years there are still large numbers of thinking men and women who take this fundamentally optimistic view of human nature. For such the way of atonement is to become at-one with your best self which is your true self. This is the morality, at its best, of the popular columnist, of the cinema, of what passes with the man-in-the-street for the conclusions of psychology.<sup>1</sup>

What the Christian has to understand is that these three ways of escape from individualism in its disintegrating form combine to create a subtle climate of thought which is all-pervasive, and which provides the common assumptions for educated men and women everywhere. The differences between these three conceptions of atonement are small compared with the importance of what they have in common, which is the assured conviction that man can save himself, and that God is entirely irrelevant. It is in the complete absence of any creative sense of dependence upon God, and therefore of any sense of

<sup>1</sup> In an article in *The Churchman* for September, 1951, entitled "Atonement and Contemporary Thought" John Drewett has developed much more fully and adequately this idea of escape from individualism. I would gratefully acknowledge my own indebtedness to his thinking.

that independence which the Bible defined as sin, that we see the most obvious characteristic of the revolution of our time. Unless we can see ourselves as upon a rock in the midst of such a cataract we shall not see how really desperate is the position in which we stand as Christians: we shall not, in fact, find our life in our faith. The true hope of the Church lies in the fact that the position in which we are is so desperate that we may at last be prevailed upon not to trust in historical accidents but in the God of history.

### III

Our analysis so far has perhaps been valid for the more self-conscious and articulate elements among the various peoples of the world. They share a common fund of ideas, and in the sharing create as well as experience the intellectual climate of our time. But they do not exist in isolation. They are also inextricably involved in the mass reactions of multitudes of ordinary folk, whose response to the revolution of our times is at a much more unconscious level.

The African farmer, the fellahin of the Middle East, the landless rural-proletariat of India, the peasantry of East Asia, these and all their more fortunate or less fortunate compatriots have also found themselves forced out of age-long patterns of common life to discover a most unwelcome individuality. Conquest by foreigners, commercial penetration by foreigners, education by foreigners, in each and all of these ways an old order of life has been disrupted. Precariously poised on the ruins of the old order and not yet seeing the shape of things to come, these unlettered mystified multitudes have been made universally conscious of a radically new insecurity. This is the form in which they have become aware of the revolutionary effects of change. What they want above all else is some collective salvation in which they can feel themselves 'belonging' together again. What Europeans find it so difficult to understand is that a process which for them has extended over six hundred years has been forced within the compass of a life time for many of the peoples of Africa and Asia. Is it to be wondered at if the response to such a revolution is emotional rather than rational?

The very suddenness of the revolution, as well as its violence, explains the form taken by nationalism and racialism. Everywhere the white man, the European, has been the recognizable agent of change, whether he be soldier or administrator, commercial entrepreneur, or missionary of a new way of life, cultural and religious. Everywhere, quite naturally, resentment against the change is now vocally a resentment against the agent of change. Everywhere in Africa and the East there is a revolt against the West and against the white man. The fact that the revolt is so largely indiscriminating is but an expression of its deeply emotional character. But a revolt cannot live on hatred. It has to have a focus of loyalty. This focus of loyalty is devotion to the nation, conceived not in constitutional terms but as a *continuum* of social life. "Here in this given area for as long as man can remember certain things have been done in a certain way. Let us by any means in our power preserve all that we can of the past. We are Indians. What is more Indian than Hinduism? Let us therefore work for

Hindustan, a homogeneous India with Hinduism as its way of life." That is one response. A parallel one exalts Islam as the only possible cement for the common life of the Middle East and Pakistan. The immediate result of this protest is the attempt to find at-one-ment in the limited and familiar sphere of a past national or racial experience. Basically it is a refusal to become citizens of the new world. But it is a very understandable response.

What the Christian needs to realize, and this is of first-rate importance for his evangelistic purpose, is that this nationalistic revival, harnessing traditional religious forms for its own purposes, does not thereby strengthen the traditional religions. In fact, nationalism is doing a great disservice to religion by using it as a means to an end. Hinduism and Islam are being linked indissolubly to the pre-revolutionary past. And, be it noted, any attempt to use Christianity as an ideology to bolster up Western nationalism is in the same category. Nationalism, which is the isolation of the individual projected on a national scale, may offer for the moment an illusion of security, may give a sense of significance to the individual, and the inspiration of a common purpose. But it is a revolution of escape into unreality, and that is no escape at all. Religions which offer a false escape, which, in fact, do not match man's dilemma, will not in the end be found competing for man's allegiance.

Far more profound, as well as far more all-embracing, is the way of escape offered by Communism. Communism professes to explain the overwhelming deluge, to be able to discern the direction of the revolution, and to be completely confident of the final outcome. We have seen its appeal to the thoughtful men and women of our time as outlined earlier in this article. Before our eyes in contemporary history we can see its appeal to the hungry masses of mankind. Here is a philosophy of history and of life which has already proved its ability to harness man's idealism, and his technical ability, to change his environment, and to mould human nature itself. Here is a dynamic which appears to be able to shape history, and to pin-point destiny. Here is a political programme and an economic programme which is well content to take nationalisms in its stride, using their enthusiasms as the necessary spade work for the uncovering of the foundations of a new world. Here indeed is titanism on the grandest scale, man flinging defiance in the face of God and insisting on a new 'six days of creation' in preparation for his sabbath rest when his achievement will be complete.

Do not let us for one moment imagine that we can meet the challenge of Communism by analysis and argument, any more than we can meet it by appropriations for defence and stock-piling atom bombs. The real challenge of Communism is that it has discovered how to marry thought to action. Some of its ideas may be wrong but at least it carries them out in practice. It may have a wrong idea of how man ought to live in community, but at least it does provide a community in which man can live. As Christians we may be completely satisfied that the Communist way of atonement misses the real point and fails to match man's need. But men who have seen preaching issue in practice, who have watched faith expressed in works, and who have

found a creed that is creative, even if these results are limited to material things, will not listen to preaching which is only preaching, will not accept as faith that which is always a projection into the invisible, will not make their own a creed which is incredible because it is not "an affirmation and an act which bids eternal truth be present fact".

All pictures and analogies fall short in their portrayal of the true complexity of our human situation. For the very faith of the Church is part of the cataclysm, itself one of the factors in the revolutionary changes of our time. And yet again the failure of the Church, the betrayal of Christ by Christians, is as surely part of the same cataclysm. It is for this reason that Christians in the deep waters of our time know themselves to be, at one and the same moment, under the judgment of God and yet nevertheless the prophets of that judgment. This is because they have discovered that the judgment of God is mercy. They stand on that rock of faith, knowing that they deserve nothing but to share in the universal destruction to which the cataracts are rushing, and yet knowing with the same complete certainty that by God's mercy the apparent chaos and tumult of this mighty flood is going to be harnessed, not wasted, is going to become a source of power, not of perdition. In that faith the Church listens for the word which will show it not only how to find rescue, but how itself to be a rescuer.

#### IV

In our day and generation, in this time of cataclysm, the Church is hearing the Word of God and is discovering slowly but surely what that must mean for its own witness. Confronted by a tumult of sound as men offer their varied ways of escape the Church is beginning to see that its prophecy lies not in trying to shout louder than the false prophets: rather its prophecy lies in demonstration. Long ago its prophets conveyed their messages quite as much by the things they did as by the things they said. Sometimes they spoke most eloquently in their silence. So to-day it is in the actual committal of itself to demonstrating the meaning of unity that the Church offers to men the only way of integration in which atonement can be expressed as the salvation of the whole life of mankind. So again to-day the Church through its members bears witness to the essential humanity of mankind by insisting, through the service of its members in the common life of men, that without *humanitas* there can be no humanity. And it discharges both of these redemptive and sanctifying actions through the medium of responsible men and women who in Christ have discovered that the individual is never 'isolated, alone and afraid' because he is always a person in responsible relationship with other persons.

And the rock from which the Church bears this witness is Christ Himself. And it is the sure testimony of Scripture, as it is of experience, that this 'rock which is Christ'; this rock which is our faith in Christ; this rock which is Christ trusted wholly and with everything, stands and does not fall.

One of the deep strands of Biblical religion is found in the close



affinity recognized between the object of faith and the activity of faith. Habakkuk sees God as trustworthy, as a rock in a time of storm, *and* he sees man living by his fidelity to the trustworthy God. St. Paul picks up this thought and makes the intimate relation between the faithful Redeemer and the man of faith the foundation of his theology, the heart of his Gospel. (Gal. ii. 16). Christ is the rock and the ground of faith. And the Christian finds his standing in the storm in his foothold on this rock. This is what it means to be justified by grace through faith.

But that is not all. In the person of Peter, at Caesarea Philippi, God's grace and man's faith met (St. Matthew xvi. 18). Christ our Lord, in a moment of matchless vision, saw in that meeting the earnest of a Church that would be world-wide, saw the triumphant fulfilment of God's purpose. Here was a rock that could move, a paradox of nature yet a commonplace of grace. The rock that was Christ (1 Cor. x. 4), and the rock that was, and is, the faith of His disciples, cannot properly be thought of as something static. It is dynamic, full of movement.

So it is that the final picture which is presented to our eyes is no longer that of a rock standing above the highest waves, a bastion of defence against the elements, but rather of an army battering down the gates of hell.

What a Gospel! No wonder that Luther in the preface to his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians cries out—"This rock must be published abroad".

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## A Fresh Theological Approach to the Christian Mission

BY THE REV. A. J. DREWETT, M.A., B.Sc.

### I

**T**HE title of this paper contains three terms which, before we proceed into our main argument, need some definition. The term Christian Mission, rather than Overseas or Home Missions, has come into use because it more faithfully describes the present nature and task of the Church. It abolishes geographical distinctions and thinks in terms of the total impact of the Christian Faith, embodied in the People of God, upon the total world situation. The Christian Mission is the age-long purpose of God in the world, overcoming evil through the dedicated witness of a community which acknowledges Him as Lord and Redeemer and which is ever open and receptive to the guidance of His Spirit. The task of the Christian Mission is the proclamation of the Gospel and the fashioning of a People acceptable to God drawn out of every nation, race and class. It is the breaking down of barriers so that all may be one in Christ. The Christian Mission is adumbrated in the faithful remnant of the Old Israel, for