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Resurgent Religion

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I

ANYONE who knows anything about world affairs accepts the fact that there is a resurgence of non-Christian religions. Most of our missionary leaders, for example, are not only aware of this resurgence, but also find in it a cause for deep concern. As a real factor in the life both of the churches and of the nations where the churches find themselves, it is the driving force in Christian Study Centres in Tokio, in the New Territories just outside Hong Kong, in Colombo, Ceylon, in Bangalore, India, in Lahore, Pakistan, and in other places. Some of the best scholarly work done to date on resurgent religions has been produced in these centres, and we should note that a good deal of it has been done by non-Anglo-Saxons and from a standpoint not seriously influenced by the teachings of Augustine or of the Reformers. Anyone who really wants to understand this important feature of the modern religious world will do well to study the literature emanating from these centres.

Whether the rank and file of the Christian churches in India, Ceylon, Burma, Pakistan, Japan, the Middle East, and North Africa have given thought to the immediate implications of the resurgence of non-Christian religions for their own life and mission is another question. Most of us are hesitant when it comes to facing what may be unpleasant. There is little indication that the Church in general, and its theological colleges in particular, have been willing to face the challenge of the new situation created by revitalized non-Christian religion. Indeed, it could readily be argued that there are more signs of awareness of the problem in our own secular colleges than in the circles concerned with theological education. Unless we change this situation soon we shall have a clergy and people who are illiterate as far as other religions are concerned, and that at a time when followers of other religions are pressing in upon us and our life from all sides as an overwhelming majority—that is to say, within the next twenty years.

In this year of grace 1960, the sheer geographical fact of distance has come to mean much less than it did even ten or fifteen years ago. What takes place on the borders of Jordan and Israel, or along the cease-fire line between North and South Korea, not only has an immediate effect on those areas, but also can easily affect all of us in all countries of the world. By the same token, such moral problems as the issue of segregation or *apartheid* can no longer be seen merely in a local setting; on the contrary,

decisions made in one country arouse speedy reactions in every country in the world—more especially, of course, in the countries that make up the great land-mass of Africa and Asia.

To state that the Asian and African countries are undergoing a revolution is an understatement. Old colonial boundaries have been struck away and new nations are now appearing, which do not always follow the old pattern of colonial days. A marked degree of anti-Western feeling is apparent even in the satellite countries of Asia. Nationalism vents itself in a patriotism as real as anything that has been known in Poland, or Italy, or Ireland. Even countries like Thailand, China, and Japan are experiencing a revolution as great as anything that has been seen in India and Burma, or even greater. In every country of Asia, and in an increasing number in Africa—and therefore in the whole Middle East as well as in North Africa—resurgent religion and national pride go hand in hand to produce what can only be called ardent patriotism. Politically we must expect an even greater intensification of the spirit of nationalism in Africa than we have known in the past few years—a growth that will probably reach its peak within two years.

As Christian people interested in both the political and the spiritual aspects of this problem, we should ask ourselves just what our own mental reactions really are. Many of us were brought up on what might almost be called the doctrine that the Christian faith is perfect light, while all other religion is darkness. Moreover, most of us who are now between forty-five and sixty years old were conditioned by the great enthusiasms of the Student Volunteer Movement. Dr. Robert E. Speer, Dr. Sherwood Eddy, and Dr. John R. Mott were our spiritual heroes, and their enthusiasms were contagious. "The evangelization of this world in this generation" was their slogan and ours too. Even as late as the end of the Second World War many of us—including this writer—felt that most of the great historic religions had suffered a mortal blow and might reasonably be expected to collapse. Certainly we were convinced that if we had both the material and the human resources available for immediate forward movement, not only would the Christian faith gain the ascendancy, but also the ancient religions, like the walls of the city of Jericho, would come tumbling down, provided only that we walked around them the requisite seven times and blew our trumpets as directed. The blowing of the trumpets certainly has been achieved, and probably we have walked around the walls even more than the requisite seven times—yet not only have the walls not tumbled down, but they might even be said to have become higher, wider, and stronger. Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism no longer seem to stand as isolated fortresses; on the contrary, they have become missionary religions. They are no longer on the defensive, but have definitely taken the offensive. We are compelled to recognize them for what they are—the faiths by which millions live—and the millions are increasing. Frankly we have as yet failed to make any real impact on any of these religions in terms of numbers. For

most of us this is a cause of deep disappointment, and a reason for not a little deep heart-searching.

II

We may profitably take a closer look at some of the particular areas concerned.

1. THE ARAB WORLD

Our preoccupation with the task of keeping our oil supplies intact and under our control has not helped to make us aware of the tremendous awakening of all Arabic countries. It is easy to dismiss the troubles that impinge on us as communist-inspired, and for many this remains a stock answer. But any attempt to understand an awakened Arabic world that omits to take into account an awakened Islamic religious consciousness is doomed to failure before it starts. Certainly Arab national unity poses a problem for Islam, which has always thought of itself in terms of political unity, and the contradictory claims of Brigadier Kassem on the one side and Colonel Nasser on the other, both appealing in the name of religion, do puzzle the devout of Islam, but the loyalties thus reawakened are overriding the political divisions and giving great strength to all Arabic appeals for national self-expression.

Today Islam is the fastest growing religion in all Africa. It is strengthening its hold in Asia. In Africa Muslim converts outnumber the converts to the Christian faith. Muslims have no missionary organization, no missionary secretary, no professional leadership of any size. They do not have a paid priesthood. In practice their priesthood is a priesthood of believers, and they are proud that their believers form a real brotherhood. Neither racial nor colour restrictions are permitted within it, and economic status entitles no man to a special seat among the faithful at prayers. The mosque is the meeting place of all Islamic mankind. Islam is one of the most active religions in the world. While natural increase does account for a good proportion of the increase in its numbers in recent years, we of the Christian faith would do well to remember that Islam is promoted by its merchants, its traders, its artisans, its barbers and its washermen—yes, even by its mendicants.

2. RESURGENT HINDUISM

In 1947 the independent Republic of India was formed within the Commonwealth. By her Constitution India was officially declared to be a religiously neutral state. Implementation of that ideal has been difficult, simply because in the minds of the vast majority of her people the majority religion, Hinduism, is equated with historic and national culture. India's leaders are sincerely committed to a policy of religious freedom, which includes the right to propagate one's own religion. This should not,

however, blind us to the strength of a revived Hinduism in India. I want to illustrate this with a few examples, taken from my own experience, which could be multiplied many times over. About two years ago, in the city where we were living on the east coast of India, India's Vice-President, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, addressed a large public meeting. This meeting was held in a large palm-leafed shelter known as a "pandal," and the temperature was well over 100 degrees. About three thousand people attended the meeting which lasted for almost two hours. Dr. Radhakrishnan took as his text the New Testament verse, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone. . . ." Following the best Christian homiletical tradition, and in a marvellously convincing way, he went on to point out to his largely Hindu audience that unless Hinduism was willing to be buried in the ground with all its undesirable accretions, its caste-system, its snobbery, and its many outmoded practices, it could never attain to its divinely-inspired mission—that of bringing its wonderful message, first to all India, and then to the world. Only thus could mankind be saved from a destruction of its own making. Shortly before this occasion, my wife and I were visiting a small town built around the hydro-electric station at Jog Falls in Mysore. I had been invited to address a small group of Telugu Christians who had come to live there. As I was being conducted to the meeting by an Indian Christian brother, we passed the local cinema. There was no parking space left around it, or near it, and a great crowd was making its way into the building. I asked my guide what picture was showing. He replied that no picture was being shown, but that Dr. ——— (one of Mysore's best known lawyers and newspaper editors, with a doctorate from an overseas university) was in town to give a philosophical lecture. His theme was "The Cultural Glories of Hinduism," and as far as I could see there were few Hindus in that area who were not attending. In India, the radio system is patterned after the B.B.C., and is government-owned, but no daily program ever begins without a morning prayer period—almost invariably Hindu—and almost all the programs are slanted to some extent towards Hindu religious thought. No public work is ever begun or opened without a religious ceremony. No ship is launched, no new steam-locomotive set on the tracks, and no bridge built, without an overt and planned act of Hindu worship.

In the face of modern science Hinduism has proved more flexible than Christianity. It has moulded itself so adeptly that the teachings of modern science do not appear in opposition to Hinduism but rather seem to be its natural outcome. Certainly atheism as such is a rare phenomenon in India, though religious agnosticism may be common. Religious expression is as visible as ever, and is fully adapted to modern living. For example, a bus driver—whether of an old and rickety model, or of one of the most recent chrome-plated monsters—will first smear the bonnet of the bus with sandalwood paste and then stand in front of his vehicle in an act of devotion before he begins his day's work. Similarly, the highly skilled technician

handling a great modern mechanical wonder will go through some form of religious exercise on many occasions in the course of his work. To a Hindu, far from being incongruous, this is a reasonable and perfectly normal procedure. I am not aware of similar thoughts on the part of most bus drivers in our own country, or of similar practices among technicians.

Hinduism, with all its variety, has no central organization. Indeed its glory is that it is not an organization in any sense of the word, but a way of life. As such it may be freer than highly organized religions to adapt itself where the conditions indicate. For instance, although Hinduism has not been known for its congregational type of worship, in recent years congregational worship, which the whole family may attend (and the whole neighbourhood hear through loud-speakers) has become quite common. Ashrams, normally considered to be places of "retreat," are becoming centres of "out-going." The "guru" and his disciples no longer consider that the people must come to them, but realize that they must go out to the people. Training of Hindu "sadhus" as religious expositors is not unknown, and "preaching missions" to Hindus are frequently held throughout the country.

It would not be correct, however, to depict all this as a liberalizing movement. In some cases exactly the opposite is true, and there are signs of a hardening that may be far more lasting than the liberalizing influences. Movements such as the Mahasabha, the Raja Swaya Sevak Sangh, the Arya Samaj, and many others, are all strict right-wing movements, which contain the seeds of a religious autocracy, and show signs of a reversion to the observance of some of the strictest tenets of Hinduism. Nonetheless, whatever form its revival may take, we cannot overlook the fact that Hinduism is more alive today than it has been in living memory, and that in its renascent form it is more appealing than ever.

3. RESURGENT BUDDHISM

In 1956-57 the twenty-fifth centenary of the birth of Siddhartha Gautama—"Buddha," or the Enlightened One—was celebrated in many countries. In Eastern lands it was referred to as Buddha Jayanti. In Rangoon there was a meeting of the Great Council of the Buddhists (of the Theravada or Hinayana tradition), which had last met some twelve centuries before. The purpose of the Great Council was to re-study the recorded teachings of Lord Buddha, and to check them for accuracy and examine them in the light of current teaching. In this they sought to see Buddhism in the setting of a badly disorganized, frightened, and war-torn world, threatened with utter destruction through atomic war. For some six months the leaders of the Council met in meditation, study, and prayer. The fact that this assembly was held in a man-made cave of great proportions, built by the Burmese government at considerable expense, is not without significance. To say the least, the Council was one of the most important conclaves of the twentieth century—however little coverage it may have received in Western newspapers.

Living as we were in India we were able to see something of the observance of the festival from nearby, and later to visit the Council centre in Rangoon. One of the most significant incidents of the Jayanti celebrations took place during the visit of the President of China to India, when he visited the Buddhist Temple together with Dr. Radhakrishnan, and the two men paid their respects in the giving of the traditional scarves and worshipped together. Somewhat later my wife and I went to one of the exhibitions of Buddhist art which were organized by the Government of India and visited by hundreds of thousands of Indians and other Asians and by a handful of Westerners like ourselves. One object of the exercise seems to have been to show that Buddhism was an outgrowth or a variant of Hinduism, which delivered itself of a great, world-moulding message that travelled as far as Japan in the East and Greece in the West, yet returned to the bosom of its mother to be accepted as part of India's great mass of truth. But behind this objective there was a stronger motive—the desire to present the life of Lord Buddha in graphic art. This presentation concerned itself with such details of the story of Gautama as the annunciation to his mother; the painless birth; the standing still of the animals of the forest and the quiet of the birds of the heavens at this miraculous (or at least notable) event; the dedication in the temple; the temptation in the jungle; the "enlightenment," or transfiguration; the feeding of the poor and healing of the sick; the Buddha's suffering for mankind, and his final appearance to his disciples and ascension into heaven. (Something of this sort is found in more permanent form in many Buddhist temples, such as the clean and very beautiful Buddhist temple at Galle Face in Colombo, Ceylon.) In addition to this great pictorial exhibition, there were many exhibits of Buddhist art and culture, some of them of great value and irreplaceable. Thailand, Burma, Ceylon, the British Museum, and the Smithsonian Institution all sent contributions; but the contribution of China—impressive, well displayed, and worth a fortune—was the most notable. It was accompanied by a small brochure, well prepared and illustrated, on the Government of China's work in restoring Buddhist temples and shrines that had fallen into disrepair.

Buddhism has revived. In Burma it is the state religion. In Ceylon it is militant, and its right-wing monks, often devoted to left-wing politics, bring heavy pressure to bear upon their government. In Thailand it is the age-old state religion, constantly refurbished. In Saigon, Vietnam, with American monetary assistance, it has built one of the loveliest of all its modern temples. In Japan Buddhism is perhaps most active in a reappearance of the sect known as "Zen."

From Buddhism as a whole comes a seemingly united pronouncement: The religion of the West has failed to bring peace to man; only the message of the Buddha can save mankind from the destruction of its own making. To this end Buddhists are committed to sending forth missionaries—to the West as well as to the East and to the islands of the sea. Further the Thera-

vada school has undertaken the preparation of a concise Buddhist Bible to give guidance and counsel to its missionaries in their task.

III

Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism are all reviving. If space permitted, one could speak of revival in Sikhism, and of a new feeling of strength in Jainism. All this can, of course, be explained away to some extent, by the assertion that this is simply the renaissance which we as Christian nations experienced about four hundred years ago and which is now catching up with the rest of the world. This may be a partial explanation, but it is far from being the whole story.

It would be of value for us as Westerners to recall that religion plays a very important part in the lives of the Asian people—a much greater part than it does for us at this stage of our development. At birth and death, and at all intermediary stages, religion has its accepted role. Actively acknowledged from morning to night, and intricately woven into an understanding of the stars by night, religion plays a vital part in the lives of the Asian peoples. That is why religious revival cannot be separated either from cultural revival or from its political accompaniment. In the case of Islam, this political link is strengthened by what we might call the attitude of Muslims, which always sees religion in a political setting.

It is in this context that we should consider the definite reasons for revival of religion in Asia today. While a detailed study of these would fill a volume, for our purposes we can reduce them to four. (i) First and foremost, there is the encounter of non-Christian religions with the Christian missionary enterprise. Missionary Christianity has influenced all three religions at their very heart, by challenging them to take a very close look at themselves in the setting of a fast-changing world. (ii) A positive influence has been exerted by the lives of national leaders like Thakin Nu, Mahatma Gandhi, and the modern Islamic poets (to name only a few). (iii) Attachment to traditional religion has been deepened by the desire for, or achievement of, political freedom. (iv) The revival of national culture and language has had a similar effect.

From these causes stem two very obvious results: (i) the birth or re-birth of a missionary spirit and impulse, and an emphasis upon the global aspect of the particular religion; (ii) efforts within each religious tradition to catch up with the modern world and the new problems which must be faced, and to prove both to friend and to stranger that the religion's characteristic message can bring peace out of chaos.

IV

We must now go on to a brief review of some of the more serious consequences of the resurgence of non-Christian religions for the Christian

churches. In the first place, I should like to note certain implications of this resurgence for the life and work of the "younger churches."

(i) For one thing, these churches, wherever they are, must learn (and learn soon) to stand on their own feet, relying only on the great resources found in Christ. They must be able to show to their own people that the religion of Jesus Christ is not a Western belief that must inevitably denationalize them, but that on the contrary it is a faith which meets the needs of all men everywhere and makes them better citizens of their own countries than they could otherwise be.

(ii) Secondly, the new situation demands a very different pattern of Christian extension (not to say, existence) from our present system. It may well be that conditions will develop under which all connections with the West will be cut off (as in the case of China today), and that the only remaining link will be the spiritual tie of prayer.

(iii) Thirdly, the new situation will most certainly lead to a drawing together of the members of the many different churches now to be found in Asia and Africa. Most of these divisions were not created by them, but were exported by us. Frequently they continue because of influences from denominational headquarters thousands of miles away, exerted through control of funds, and critical of the younger churches' actions. Minorities all over the world are drawing together. The Christian churches in Asia and Africa are also drawing together and will continue so to do. Even "Faith Missionary" societies are drawing themselves into closer fellowships and following lines of co-operative action.

While the resurgence of non-Christian religions is most immediately significant for the Christian churches growing in the native soil of these great religions, it also raises profound issues for the Christian people of the West. The more urgent of these should be spelled out, at least summarily.

(i) In the midst of a world divided by chaos and fear, much of it of our own making, and in the face of resurgent religion, a divided Christendom has little relevance.

(ii) We should do well to examine the teaching of our own Scriptures in such significant statements as the assertion, "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold" (John 10:16), or the words of Peter to Cornelius: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34). We need to re-examine our understanding of the doctrine of God the Creator, and to ask how he has worked out his plan in other days, in other places, and among other people.

(iii) Most of all perhaps, we need to re-examine our understanding of the work of God the Holy Spirit. It would probably be agreed by Christians of all shades of opinion that God the Holy Spirit is God at work in the hearts and lives of men. The Holy Spirit of God is the initiator of every good thought, every impulse to holiness, every good deed. The Holy Spirit is God

at work in the universe fighting against sin. Should we not be prepared, then, to take the logical step of saying that if Hinduism cleans up its temples and removes what it now considers to be indecent, if Hinduism draws men together in a worship that now lays a heavy emphasis upon the ethical and moral, this is also his work? If it is not his work, then who is doing it? Is our faith able to see God at work in the revival and resurgence of non-Christian religions? Or at least are we prepared to see in this revival the judgment of God upon our own indifference, lethargy, and inadequacy of effort?

(iv) We must realize further that in this age of modern communication and mobility of peoples our own actions as people who are known to be Christians have an immense effect upon our testimony to the Kingdom. There is much in our national behaviour and customs that stands squarely across the way where the Gospel should have free passage.

(v) Has all this nothing to say about Christian missionary education and theological education? A whole generation of students now going through our colleges and soon to influence the life of our churches has been conditioned by the writings of Toynbee and Radhakrishnan—to say nothing of the mass of publications on non-Christian religions now readily and cheaply obtainable in any bookstore. To such a generation will the exportation of the Christian religion be either desirable or justifiable? The very notion of a Christian world mission could easily appear presumptuous. As for theological colleges, unless we incorporate into our teaching a real and practical emphasis upon non-Christian religions and their relation to the Christian faith we shall have a clergy which, because it is illiterate in this most important field, will be utterly incapable of giving a necessary leadership at a time when the real confrontation with non-Christian religions must take place. At least as much emphasis must be given in our theological training to other religions as we give to Plato and Socrates (to say nothing of a whole host of their successors). In other words, the teaching in our theological colleges must be re-orientated so that we see ourselves as a missionary people, able not only to give a reason for the faith which is within us, but also to show how this faith is the fulfilment of the greatest and deepest desires of all mankind.

(vi) What have we to say about the modern missionary organization of the Church? Much of our organization seems to exist simply for the sake of perpetuating itself. Much of our money and manpower is dedicated to maintaining the *status quo*. There is no really imaginative program on our books anywhere in the world. We feel happy if we can “hold our own.” How much of this is due to our having become weighed down by our missionary machinery? We might note, for example, that terrible contradiction in terms, the “Mission Station.” Mission implies mobility; station means standing still. The “Foreign Mission Society” seems dedicated—often against its will—to turning wheels that move so very slowly, if they move

at all. This inertia can only mean that we have failed to grasp the meaning of "mission" in the light of New Testament teaching. We set up a dichotomy between "the Church," meaning us at the centre, who send, and the "Mission," meaning organizations set up to achieve a particular purpose, customarily in some place other than "here," and usually in foreign lands—and dominated by the idea that the people "there" are simply to receive. We cling to this idea until all our thinking about other people and other nations is unconsciously ruled by it. But to maintain this very old (and perhaps once valid) dichotomy is exceedingly dangerous. It is not built on the New Testament, for there the younger churches send their gifts to the older Church in Jerusalem, and Paul never writes about "foreign missions." Nor do the great teachers of the Christian faith through history. "Foreign Mission" is a very modern term. The Scriptures refer to the "Churches," not to "Missions." In so far as we cling to this idea, we assume that we must continue to be the pioneers and set up the new work, and imply that the primary duty of the younger churches is to become established. Thus we deprive the younger churches of the joy and the growth that comes through fulfilling the duty of every Christian to share in "mission"—in the compulsive urge of communicating the Gospel. One of the dangerous results of this obsolete policy has been that we have made our "mission" work and the extension of the Gospel dependent upon our money and our personnel; consequently, if any international crisis prevents the free movement of either, our whole program is thrown into disorder.

(vii) Today more North American Christians are living abroad than ever before. Coming from this continent, whether they like it or not they are looked upon as Christians. Their living testimony to the presence of the living God, or alternatively their display of crass materialism, is recorded every day of their sojourn among other peoples. If Islam has developed a missionary consciousness among Muslims as a whole, are we not capable of doing the same for our people (even tourists) who go overseas? To do so requires conviction, training and discipline, as well as sentiment. Communism now equips all its technicians and representatives in any sphere with a detailed and intensive course on the land, culture, and religion of the people among whom they will be working. Often this training is more severe than our preparation of professional missionaries. How can we dare to fall behind?

The attempt to spread the Gospel through professional agencies has clearly been a failure, when viewed against the great unfinished task. Time is *not* on our side. Is God forcing us to realize that the missionary task is the vocation of all Christians? Is he forcing us to abandon our ecclesiastical fortresses, whether they be in the West or in the East, and compelling us to see not only that we must be more mobile and flexible, but also that barriers of geography can no longer be considered important, or denominational precedent an essential criterion? It might well be that the very

survival of Christianity depended on our response to these questions. Even more important than the quest for survival, however, is the choice between obedience and disobedience to the recognized will of God. "We are all called," it has been well said, "to be missionaries of the Gospel of Christ, whether our journey be long or short; the missionary frontier runs through every land where there are men and women who are without Christ. The real frontier is unbelief." Acceptance of this truth as an integral part of our theology and our teaching could revolutionize the whole Church.