

THE FINALITY OF CHRISTIANITY

PROFESSOR WILLIAM HALLOCK JOHNSON, PH.D., D.D.
LINCOLN UNIVERSITY, PENNSYLVANIA

"ART thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" This question of John the Baptist was a natural and legitimate one. John, indeed, had said, "He must increase, but I must decrease," but John never supposed that his career would end with a long imprisonment in a dungeon and a criminal's death. The thought would be insistent, "If Jesus is the Messiah, why is he indifferent to the fate of his forerunner? Is not the release of the prisoner a sign and credential of the true Messiah?" That even John the Baptist, who had given so wonderful a testimony to the office and character and work of Jesus, should in his prison be subject to despondency, impatience, and doubt, is not to be wondered at. There was a gentle rebuke in the answer which Jesus sent back to him, but this was followed by a splendid eulogy upon the greatness of John's character.

The question which John asked of Jesus is being asked to-day in a slightly different form: Is Christianity the religion that was to come, or do we look for another? Is there to be some other religion more satisfying in its supply of human need, richer in its promise of health and happiness for the individual, and offering a quicker and surer remedy for the economic and social ills of the race? The question is again a legitimate one. We recall a noon-day sermon in Trinity Church, New York City, in the course of which the preacher, Phillips Brooks, remarked: "If I can find any being who will lead me higher and farther than the Christ, I will drop the hand of the Christ and follow that being." Is there, then, or will there be, any other religion, or any substitute for religion, or any improvement upon Christianity, that will lead us higher and farther? Is Christianity the final religion, needing

only to be more clearly apprehended and more fully applied, or do we look for another? Some reasons for believing in the finality of Christianity may be suggested.

1. Christianity is the final religion because it is the most historical of all religions. In no other religion can there be traced centuries of preparation in the education of a people, leading up to the supreme revelation in the fullness of time. The Word was made flesh, the creed was wrought "in loveliness of perfect deeds," and the message of the gospel was written in letters large and plain across the face of human history. Scholars have pointed out some close affinities between Christianity and the mystery religions of the time which centered about the dying and rising of the god of vegetation, but these mystery religions lacked historical foundation as well as moral power and have passed away; while in Christianity alone, as a critic has remarked, there is "the connection of a religious principle with a Person who had walked upon earth and suffered death." So deeply is Christianity embedded in history that every historic event, by believer and unbeliever alike, is dated backward and forward from the advent of its Founder. In other religions we find beautiful ideas, golden maxims for conduct, and evidences of the reaching out of the soul after God, but Christianity alone has its Calvary and Easter Day, the great historic events upon which the hopes of the world rest.

2. Christianity is the final religion because it is the most exclusive of all religions. At a time when eclecticism in religion was common and the cult of new deities was fashionable, Christianity waged undying warfare against polytheism and idolatry. The early Christians, under pain of persecution and death, refused to compromise with legalism, with emperor worship, or with polytheism in any form. We admire to-day the lofty teaching of Plato and Cicero and Plotinus, but no one of these raised an effective protest against the dominant polytheism. When Neoplatonism is recommended to-day as of almost coördinate value with Christianity, it is well to recall the words of Harnack:

“Christianity really did away with polytheism, whereas the Neoplatonic philosophy of Porphyry did not possess the courage for that; herein lay the greatest difference. This religious philosophy lacked the power of exclusiveness, and of that lack it died.” Christianity is inclusive in its program of making disciples of all nations, but this can be accomplished only as Christianity is kept free from compromising admixture. The exclusiveness of Christianity, a feature which it shares with Mohammedanism alone, is one reason for believing in its finality.

3. Christianity is the final religion because of all religions it is the most persistently vital. The vitality of a movement is shown by its continuous growth in the face of opposition. Christian history for twenty centuries has been marked by persecution and opposition, but the failure of this opposition may be well summarized in the words of the Pharisees: “Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? Behold, the world is gone after him.” Two thousand years ago there were no Christians; now thirty-eight per cent of the world’s inhabitants are adherents of Christianity. A few weeks after Christ was crucified the disciples were preaching Jesus and the resurrection. Persecution scattered instead of quenching the fire, and the bitterest opponent of Christianity became a flaming herald of the Cross. Martyrdoms in the arena made converts for the faith, and humble Christians praying in caves and catacombs proved stronger than the Emperor upon the throne. The Christian conquest of the Roman Empire is regarded as the miracle of history, but it is paralleled by the progress of modern missions in India, where ten thousand converts are added each month, and in other heathen lands. Periods of decline and corruption in the church have been succeeded by movements of mighty revival. The Copernican discovery, the evolution theory, the rise of Biblical criticism, and, lastly, the Great War, were all loudly proclaimed as giving the deathblow to Christianity; but it is confident, alive, and aggressive, to-day. The persistent vitality of Christianity was strikingly acknowledged by an

agnostic writer, Mr. William Archer, in the *Rationalist Press Association Annual*:—

“The Gospel miracles which are cited among its evidences are the veriest trifles compared with the authentic, undeniable miracle of Christianity’s mere existence. . . . Subjected to a bombardment of unexampled violence from every point of the material and moral universe, it shows never a sign of surrender. . . . Blown sky-high to-day it presents an unbroken and smiling surface to-morrow. . . . No other religion, be it remembered, is subjected to anything like the same ordeal. . . . It is the survival of Christianity in the realistic atmosphere of the West that is such an amazing and impressive phenomenon. Defenses it has none; its last bastions were pulverized at least a generation ago. But still it rears its head, serene, arrogant, undismayed. . . . It is just here that we find ourselves face to face with miracle.”

Survival in itself need not demonstrate truth or even moral fitness. But this miracle not only of the survival of Christianity, thus strikingly expressed by an unbeliever, but of its continuous growth, is an evidence that it is the final religion.

4. Christianity is the final religion because it meets the needs of the most people. It is adapted to all periods in human life. It is for the child, with its trustfulness and its tender affection; for the young man, with his aspiration and ambition to do a worthy work in the world; for the man of middle life, bearing the heat and burden of the day; and for the old man, who, when friends have gone before, and business no longer engrosses, can say, “My sun sets to rise again.” It is for rich and poor, Greek and barbarian, bond and free. It crosses all boundaries that time, geography, race, culture, or temperament can set up. It is for the mystical East and the practical West, for the emotional South and the intellectual North. The gates are open for each one of these temperaments, according to the vision of the Apocalypse. It is said that the pillars of a bridge in an Austrian city are carved to represent the different offices of the Christ. The laborer in the early morning pauses before Christ the Carpenter; the farmer,

driving his flock to market, bows before Christ the Good Shepherd; the children, hurrying to school, worship Christ the Teacher; while the invalid, seeking the genial rays of the sun, prays to Christ the Great Physician. Christianity is for the workshop and the closet of prayer, for the wedding festival as well as the chamber of affliction and the house of mourning. The imperial sweep of its Great Commission embraces all the nations of the earth and all the ages of time. The universal adaptability of Christianity is an argument for its finality.

5. Christianity is the final religion because it is the most comprehensive in its teaching. Some religions like Hinduism draw a vertical line, teaching the virtues of contemplation and devotion; while others like Confucianism draw a horizontal line, emphasizing the duties of social life. Christianity makes love to God the first commandment, but connects with it inseparably the duty of love to man. "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" A full-orbed Christianity teaches alike the faith taught by Paul, the love taught by John, and the good works taught by James. Its parables, such as those of the Pearl, of the Lost Sheep, of the Good Samaritan, and of Dives and Lazarus, have created an enthusiasm finding different expression in different ages of the church, — now in the anchorite's passion for personal holiness, now in the evangelist's passion for souls, now in the philanthropist's passion to relieve suffering, and now in the reformer's passion for social righteousness which is gripping the church of to-day. Christianity unites the two ideals of holiness and happiness, but puts holiness first, as in its great command "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." It sets before us the inspiring hopes of the vision of God, and of likeness to Christ, and of the coming of Christ, but always so as to bear directly and powerfully upon the humblest and most practical duties of everyday life. "Be ye stedfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." The comprehensiveness of Christianity's teaching, needing no supplement as the world's

thought advances, but guiding the world's advance, is an evidence that it is the final religion.

6. Christianity is the final religion because it deals most seriously with the problem of sin. Without sin in its various forms of selfishness, greed, cruelty, lust, and deceit, earth would be almost a paradise, there would be few problems to solve, and the dangers which menace our civilization would disappear. It is useless to deny sin, as is done by some modern sects, or to treat it lightly, as has been the tendency of moralists from Socrates down. The attitude of Christian Science, especially in war time, recalls the experience of the geologist seeking to collect funds from the business men of San Francisco for the investigation of earthquakes. He was met with the answer: "Forget it. There are no earthquakes." To deny sin or to camouflage it under another name does not remove its guilt or prevent its havoc in human life.

Time will not remove the guilt of sin, nor stifle the accusations of conscience. Respectability will not cover sin. The judge in John Masefield's poem, after sentencing to death a mere boy who in a passion of jealousy had killed his rival, kneels in his private office and prays:—

"O God, Thou knowest I'm as blind as he,
As blind, as frantic, not so single, worse,
Only Thy pity spared me from the curse.
Thy pity, and Thy mercy, God, did save,
Thy bounteous gifts, not any grace of mine,
From all the pitfalls leading to the grave,
From all the death-feasts with the husks and swine.
God, Who hast given me all things, now make shine
Bright in this sinner's heart that he may see.
God, take this poor boy's spirit back to Thee."

Morality will not satisfy the conscience. Discerning souls can only say with Whittier, the Sir Galahad of American song:—

"Let the thick curtain fall;
I better know than all
How little I have gained,
How vast the unattained."

At the Cross alone has sin been dealt with adequately. The Great War has taught men anew the lesson of redemption through sacrifice. There are some who even in the pulpit decry the crudities of a "blood theology," and would have Jesus come down from the cross. If Jesus had not been manifested at the end of the ages to put away sin, and to make other sacrifices forever obsolete, by the sacrifice of himself, it is highly probable that these critics as well as ourselves would be bowing down before heathen altars, trying by the blood of animal sacrifice to make atonement for our sins. The fact that Christianity alone has diagnosed the moral disorder of man's nature, and alone has supplied a remedy which satisfies the demands of the Divine law and of the human conscience, is an evidence that it is the final religion.

7. Christianity is the final religion because it answers the most problems. Take the problem of suffering forced upon the world as it is draining the cup of bitterness pressed upon it by the war. To deny or ignore it is to assume an artificial pose which can be maintained only at the expense of intellectual integrity. The will-to-believe that there is no suffering is in this case the will-to-make-believe, and sooner or later it must be acknowledged that "it does hurt." Christianity affords no theoretical solution, but sheds upon the problem a softening light. It offers hope to the downcast, and a beatitude to the mourner, and promises that all things work together for good to them that love God. The plowshare of affliction is to make the soil more fertile, the fiery trial is to refine the silver until it reflects the Divine image. We must still walk by faith, not by sight; but, looking at the Cross and the Resurrection, we have assurance that God shares our sorrow and can deliver us from it. Spiritism affords a fitful and uncertain gleam as it seeks to "widen the chinks" and to let in the light from the future world. In the gospel alone life and immortality are brought to light; death loses its sting and the grave its victory and the undiscovered country is changed into the Father's house. By the transform-

ing light which it sheds into the dark places of human experience, Christianity commends itself as the final religion.

8. Christianity is the final religion because it has in it the most saving power. It can reach down to the despairing and the outcast and lift him up to self-respect, strength of character, and useful service for his fellow men. Its masterpieces have often been made of unpromising material. The chief of sinners becomes the chief of apostles. John Newton, a blasphemer and a "slave of slaves," sings the sweetest songs of Christian devotion. When General William Booth started his mission in London he was asked where he would find his Christian workers, and he replied, "In the saloons and dance halls." A Chinese woman, a moral and physical wreck from opium, who sold her daughter for means to obtain the drug, told a missionary: "I am not a woman; I am a devil." The missionary, now in this country hears that the same woman is now "well and fat and happy-looking." "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them." The dynamic quality of the gospel is its chief recommendation. It is the power of God unto salvation, and so approves itself as the final religion.

Sir E. Ray Lankester, who is classed as a freethinker, said: "In my opinion the Christian religion is being enormously strengthened in its noblest features by this war. . . . We are fighting for what we all recognize as the permanent and indisputable essence of Christian morality." Few thoughtful men will refuse to acknowledge the excellence of Christian ethics, the desirability of its more general application, the superiority of Christianity over non-Christian religions, or its power to lift the individual from degradation and sin. But what of the power of Christianity to cure the corporate ills of humanity and to allay the strife of classes and races and nations? Is there at any rate, when we think soberly, any prospect that it

will do this? We may say negatively that there is no other hope for humanity or civilization than in the application of Christian principles to social problems and to international relationships. In the light of the war we now see that science has no panacea for social ills and can give no assurance of human progress. Science may easily be transformed into a sort of devil's laboratory and agency of destruction. Edison said that invention would abolish poverty, but in the hands of cruelty and greed it may be terribly destructive of wealth and saddle the world with an enormous burden of debt, and, apart from the restraints of Christian morality, may become the Frankenstein of civilization. A bigger pile of accumulated wealth may mean a fiercer struggle to possess it. Our industrial system is the cause of discontent and strife between the classes, and commercial rivalry is a fruitful cause of war. Ease of intercourse multiplies the sources of friction and may bind the nations together in a bundle of death instead of life. Diplomacy, it may be said, can devise a league of nations, but the only advantage of a league of nations over the old system of a "balance of power" is that such a league is founded on the Christian principles of protection to the weak, justice to the oppressed, the guarantee of liberty to all, and the suppression of war. It is further apparent that the League of Nations will be effective in securing these objects only in proportion to the strength and vitality of Christian sentiment in the nations who control it. The only solution for the ills of humanity lies in the application, to the modern situation, of good old-fashioned, Golden-Rule, Good-Samaritan Christianity.

"Solution there is none
Save in the Golden Rule of Christ alone."

That Christianity will triumph on the broader field of social and international relationships is only a faith; that the only hope of humanity is in such a triumph of Christianity has become a certainty.

Christianity approves itself as the final religion when it is compared with naturalistic substitutes for religion. When foolish men or nations say in their heart that there is no God, or when they adopt a lower than the Christian conception of God, they become corrupt and do abominable works and there is none that doeth good. Christianity likewise commends itself as the final religion when compared with any or all of the ethnic faiths. It supplies their lacks and excels their excellencies. But, once more, Christianity is the final religion when compared with its forerunner, Judaism. To-day, as of old, the Jew faces the question, "When the Messiah cometh, will he do more signs than these?" Will he more strikingly or appropriately fulfill prophecy? Will he speak more convincingly or more tenderly about God and heaven, about sin and sorrow? Will he show us a purer and loftier ideal of character? Will he teach with more authority, or present a more inspiring and practical program for the guidance of men and nations, than is found in the Sermon on the Mount and in the law of love? Will he do more signs than these, more works of compassion and power? The Jew is confronted with the dilemma either that Jesus of Nazareth was the coming one, or that they cannot look for another. It is no wonder that many Jews have abandoned the Messianic hope or say that peace or religious freedom is their Messiah.

The final religion cannot be founded by a lawgiver, for the law may be criticized by the moral sense of the future ages and amended or superseded. The law made nothing perfect, and was indeed adapted to the moral childhood of the race. Nor can the final religion be founded by a prophet, for another prophet may arise after him, with more entrancing visions, with deeper spiritual insight, and with fuller revelation of God's purposes and of God's love.

The final religion was founded by One who came to fulfill the law and to write the law of love on human hearts. It was founded by One who was the central theme of prophecy, the brightness of the Father's light, and the

express image of his love, whose words will never pass away because he will never pass away. It was founded by One who in his death upon the cross and in his intercession perfectly fulfills the ideas of priesthood and sacrifice. It was founded by One whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and whose dominion will endure to all generations.