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THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

TO THOSE who tremble for the Ark of God in India now that British Rule has come to an end, and whose anxiety has been deepened by the ghastly news filtering through from the Punjab, may I, as a Christian missionary who spent forty-three happy and crowded years in that fascinating land and during that long spell received nothing but courtesy and kindness from its people, state briefly the grounds of my confidence that these recent dramatic Indian happenings will fall out for the furtherance rather than the frustration of the Christian movement? With the majority of my countrymen I see in the transfer of power from Whitehall to Delhi and Karachi not only the end of a long and bitter struggle but also the fine flowering of British policy; and as a Christian who believes in God's governance of His universe I see in these swiftly moving events the outworking of a Divine purpose.

Were the Apostle Paul alive to-day and confronted, as we are, by the confused and changing Indian scene, I think he would say, as he said of his reception in the pagan city of Ephesus: "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries". Adversaries are to be expected. They have always accompanied and impeded the onward march of Truth; but their opposition has but accentuated the challenge of the great door and effectual and the splendour of the Christian advance. In the Christian vocabulary crisis and opportunity mean the same thing.

I

At the outset, let us not forget that the warrant for Christianity lies not in the gift of kings and parliaments, nor in the good pleasure of contending religions, but in the Charter, never recalled and never revised, given to his disciples by the Founder of the Christian Religion, which reads: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature". Whatever happens in India, Africa or China in no way lessens the Christian obligation to give the peoples of the world the Gospel of Christ in its simplicity and integrity, without apology and without arrogance.

That fundamental consideration apart, there are certain reassuring facts in the Indian scene that establish confidence regarding the future, and I commend them to your judgment; but I would remind you that all our judgments on things Indian must be governed by the colossal and sombre background of 400 million people, divided on certain fundamental issues, and liable to be swept by gusts of racial and religious passion. Here, then, are some of these omens of good hope.

(1) History would bear out that India on the whole has been hospitable to Christianity. That would seem to be specially true of Hindu India, and we must not forget that the sub-continent we have been accustomed to speak of as India is predominantly Hindu. An illustration lies to hand in the ancient Syrian Church which has been domiciled in South India for more than 1500 years and given to India some distinguished citizens. While Islam, which claims the spiritual allegiance of 100 million Indian Moslems, may not have established the same reputation for religious toleration as Hinduism, let us remember that the great Moslem Emperor Akbar, who reigned in India when Elizabeth reigned in England, was famous for his endeavours to reconcile conflicting religions and resolve their devotees into one united and happy family. Tennyson has enshrined this attitude in the familiar lines of Akbar's Dream:

Well, I dreamed
That stone by stone I reared a sacred fane,
A temple, neither pagod, mosque, nor church,
But loftier, simpler, always open-door'd
To every breath from heaven, and Truth and Peace
And Love and Justice came and dwelt therein.

But leaving that pleasant land of dreams and returning to present day India, we note two strangely contrasted facts: in the first place a fear in Christian circles that were Islam dominant, as it will be in Pakistan, the Christian cause would certainly be in danger; and in the second place the significant spectacle of Moslems and Christians taking their stand on the fundamental principle of Religious Liberty and asserting their common right to profess, preach and propagate their respective Faiths in a land where Hindus are in a commanding majority, an odd and yet steadying factor in the situation.

(2) Returning to the main line: it is significant that Christian Missions have fared better on the whole in Native States than in British India as, for example, in Travancore, Tinnevely and

Hyderabad. These States are sovereign within their own territories, with power to ban or bless the Christian missionary, his schools, hospitals, preachings and all that is his. That they have blessed rather than banned is a good augury for what will happen when India settles down into two independent and sovereign Dominions. It must, however, be borne in mind that as Christians increase in numbers and influence they are liable to come into conflict with the ruling power. That seems to be happening in Travancore now.

(3) In the third place, we must admit that the British Government has not always been friendly to Christian Missions. The East India Company gave William Carey a very bleak reception, and the policy of religious neutrality followed later by British administrators has operated more often than not to the advantage of Hindu and Moslem rather than Christian, for the simple reason that the average official is sensitive to any charge that he is favouring his own side. Be that as it may, religious neutrality has come to stay, and no responsible Indian leader has suggested that it should be abandoned. Missionaries of all nationalities will gratefully admit that in later years the British Government in India has dealt fairly by Christian Missions and made substantial grants to their educational and medical institutions; but, on the other hand, these friendly gestures have fostered the suspicion, widely diffused in the general mind, that the average Christian missionary, be he British, American or Continental, is a disguised agent of the Paramount Power and therefore indifferent or hostile to the national demand for self-government. Happily, that suspicion is rapidly dissolving and the missionary is coming to be accepted and judged on his merits as "a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the Gospel of God".

(4) There is a fourth consideration in this connection that merits mention. As a bulwark against persecution, a buttress of law and order, a guardian of the rights of minorities, the British Government has built up a stable tradition that succeeding Governments are unlikely to depart from. In fact, Hindu and Moslem leaders have hastened to state in clear and emphatic terms their determination to uphold the fundamental rights of the minority communities and the principle of religious liberty. Whatever pundits may say to the contrary, I am convinced that democratic ideals have come to stay in India.

(5) But let us turn to a fact of greater moment than those I have mentioned: the Church of Christ has taken root in India and is steadily growing in numbers and influence. On its stability the Future of Christianity in India must inevitably depend. Christians now number roughly eight million, divided equally between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Recruited mainly from the miserably poor and largely illiterate masses, formerly known as the "depressed classes" or "untouchables" but now honourably classified as the "scheduled castes", the Church is admittedly weak; but weak as it is it possesses the supreme quality of survival. It does more: it upholds the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you", and it gives great gifts to mankind. Among these gifts let me mention two.

(a) The Indian Church has given to the world some illustrious citizens. It gave Pandita Ramabai, one of the greatest women of all time; in Sadhu Sundar Singh it gave us our modern Francis of Assisi; in Narain Vaman Tilak, the Christian poet of Western India whose lyrics are sung wherever the Marathi language is spoken, it gave another gem; and what shall I say of the late Bishop Azariah of Dornakal, whom I was privileged to know as friend and chief, for he was president of the National Christian Council all the time I was secretary, an outstanding Christian leader, known, respected and loved far beyond these Indian frontiers. I look round in vain to find his like in the courts of the Church in the West. In passing it is worthy of note that in the new cabinet of the Dominion of India two distinguished Indian Christians, one of them a lady, fill important offices: Dr. John Matthai is Minister of Railways and Transport, and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur is Minister of Health. These appointments certainly indicate no anti-Christian bias.

(b) I would fain enlarge on the second contribution the Church in India has made to the well-being of mankind, and particularly to the Christian section of it: it has shown the way to Church Union. On September 27, 1947, there was inaugurated the Church of South India, in whose worship and service Anglicans, Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians, representing a Christian community a million strong, will share a common fellowship and a common ministry. This is something new in Church Union for it bridges the ecclesiastical ravine between episcopal and non-episcopal churches, an achievement

that has hitherto passed the wit and craftsmanship of our best Christian statesmanship. Coming from a weak and struggling Church, domiciled in a divided and faction-ridden land, this surely is good and reassuring news, and a reminder that we do well not to underrate the capacity of the Indian people.

There is a further relevant point in connection with the Indian Church that I must underline, for it bears directly on the Future of Christianity in India. When the International Missionary Council met in India at the end of 1938 it made the solemn affirmation, "The Church is Christ's Missionary to the World"; and the Indian Church, sensitive to the challenge, accepted the obligation to complete the unfinished missionary task of commending the Christian Message to all the peoples of India. In other words, the primary purpose of evangelisation that brought the great missionary societies has now in the case of India passed over to the indigenous Church. While that cardinal fact must govern future missionary policy it must not deflect the missionary societies from their original calling. What it means is that that calling will now be implemented in partnership with the Churches that through their labours have come into being, and that the whole Christian enterprise at home and abroad will be interpreted in terms of the Church Universal. There is this further all-important consideration that since the indigenous Church has established itself in the permanent structure of Indian life we may rest assured that whatever changes may come, political or otherwise, the Christian witness will not be silenced. The Church is growing from within and its remarkable growth is due to the simple fact that humble men and women, mindful of the Church's slogan: "Every Christian a Witness", are going out gladly to tell their friends and neighbours what Christ has done for them. If that be proselytising I wish we had more of it at this end. The broad fact that emerges is this: that the Church rather than the Mission will now stand guard over the future of Christianity in India, and to that is joined my own conviction that the Church will be faithful to her charge.

II

It is time for us now to look at the Adversaries.

(1) In the forefront is the ancient and malignant spirit of evil that infests the thoughts and actions of men and opposes the

Will of God. The offence of the Cross has not ceased. I shall never forget the effect on a large and enthusiastic conference on Evangelism held in Madras, when, after a spell of glowing reports, an honoured missionary rose and said quietly, "Let us not forget the Enemy". The "ancient Prince of Hell" that was so real to Martin Luther is no stranger to the Christian missionary, and we need not be surprised if he appear in many guises in independent India.

(2) A second formidable Adversary, though not of the same malignant type, is the resurgent Religions of India. The national movement, while it has opened the sluice-gates of Secularism, has also, oddly enough, brought new life and vigour to the old Religions. The saffron robe and begging bowl of the Buddhist have largely disappeared from the Indian scene; but Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and some of the lesser creeds are alive and on the march, resolved to maintain and advance their essential interests. They challenge Christianity's right to the spiritual allegiance of India. Many regard secularism, with its spearhead of a Godless communism, as Adversary No. 1; but others, equally skilled in reading the signs of the times, see in a resurgent and modernised Hinduism, with its ban on proselytising, Christianity's most formidable opponent. Following hard after comes Islam, its prestige immensely enhanced by the achievement of Pakistan. It will certainly press its advantage, although, for the time being, joined in friendly propagandist strategy with Christianity as against anticipated Hindu dominance. Unfortunately, religious rivalry has been accentuated by the electoral system of communal representation under which conversion from one religion to another upsets the voting balance. It means that if a Hindu becomes a Christian the result is a vote less to the Hindus and a vote more to the Christians, and the same would apply if the convert were a Moslem. That is a serious consideration in a land where power politics and religious politics tend to suffuse. I understand communal representation will soon cease in the Dominion of India; and since Islam is now enthroned in Pakistan I expect it will cease there also. That should mitigate the present fierce antagonism to proselytising. It is an ugly charge this of proselytising, or making converts, for it carries the sinister implication of fishing in troubled waters; of infringing religious courtesy; of using material means to secure spiritual ends. Mission hospitals, schools, colleges and social service

activities are looked upon as so many cleverly disguised varieties of bait, designed to beguile unsuspecting non-Christian sheep into the Christian fold. Since this charge of spiritual sheep-stealing vitally affects the future of Christianity in India the Church must see to it that the methods it employs are in consonance with the integrity of the message it proclaims. The "rice Christians" charge is easily made; but let us not forget that instead of loaves and fishes what meets the Christian convert is more often persecution, social ostracism and loss of worldly goods, and that in the true Christian sense conversion is an act of God. Moreover, any attempt to increase the Christian census figures by offering material inducements is repellent to the universal Christian conscience. Three inflexible principles must guide the Christian preacher—the integrity of his message, the purity of his motives and the fairness of his methods. He will always respect the sovereign rights of personality.

(3) In the third place we recognise in oncoming Secularism another formidable Adversary. India, long regarded as incurably religious, and splendidly occupied with the things of the spirit, is now turning from her ancient altars to worship at the modern shrines of Materialism, so much so that Mahatma Gandhi was constrained to cry out, "Man seems to have dethroned God". How far Secularism, whether as unashamed Materialism, Fabian Socialism, or Communism fed from Russian springs, has penetrated Indian thought and life would be hard to measure; but there can be little doubt that Communism is capturing the student world and making a strong appeal to the peasant and artisan. Already on the horizon appears the darkening menace of an agrarian rising on a national scale. I think we may take it for granted that certainly in India, and probably in Pakistan, a Secular State will come into action with religious neutrality inscribed on its banners; but while we read in that a favourable omen let us not forget that these same States are likely to tend more and more to control and curtail religious activities in education, medicine and social service. In this connection the work of Christian Missions is likely to be restricted in three important spheres—the imparting of Christian instruction in schools and colleges; the reduction, or even cancellation, of Government grants to missionary institutions; and the likelihood that evidence of conversion satisfactory to a court of law will be required before baptism. The outcry against proselytising is

directed against what Christianity regards as making disciples in accordance with its Founder's commission. It will therefore be the duty of the Church to dispel as far as it can the odium that at present attaches to the term proselyte, a term once held in honourable regard. The right to change one's religion as well as to hold and propagate it is inherent in the conception of religious liberty, and whatever happens the prerogative of personal choice must be kept inviolate.

III

To come back to the great door and effectual. While alarm and anxiety exist in many quarters regarding the future of Christianity in India, my own view, springing from inner conviction and reinforced by first-hand information from responsible sources in India, is that the opportunities for Christian witness and Christian service far outweigh the inhibitions of the many adversaries. The dangers of fanatical uprisings are unpredictable; but Christianity in its very essence is a Ministry of Reconciliation, and in these tragic days of communal strife, of devastated homes, of helpless refugees exposed to starvation and incredible hardship, I am thankful and proud to know that my fellow Christians are making full proof of their ministry. In the desperately needed relief measures Christian doctors and nurses together with a noble army of volunteer workers are taking an arduous and greatly appreciated part. It is their duty and privilege to follow the Golden Rule taught by their Lord: "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise".

As we contemplate the Future of Christianity in India let us pause for a moment to mark the amazing change that has come over our Indian-British relations consequent on the transfer of control to Indian hands. The dark and sinister clouds of suspicion and hatred have given way to the sunshine of a new understanding wherein, on a basis of equality, India and Great Britain have entered into a covenant of abiding friendship and mutual respect. In the recent orgies of violence that have disfigured the fair face of India it is a matter of happy significance that the tides of hatred have passed Europeans and Indian Christians quietly by, except in a very few instances. That is something that augurs well for the future and something for which you and I should be unfeignedly thankful. Among the

good gifts Britain has given to India I think her people will give grateful priority to the blessings of Christ's Gospel. By the same token, we will not forget that India has spiritual gifts of the finest quality to give to us and to all men. Her insistence on the supremacy of the things of the spirit is something the world cannot afford to lose. The great Bishop Westcott used to say that from India would ultimately come the true interpretation of the Gospel according to St. John. Of this there can be no doubt: that on the international highways of the future much spiritual commerce will pass between India and ourselves.

The view I have been trying to state is vividly confirmed in an article by my old friend Dr. Stanley Jones in the *National Christian Council Review* for August, 1947. It used to be said of the late Dr. Alexander Whyte of Edinburgh that "all his geese were swans", and the same might be said of Stanley Jones; but better his sunny optimism than the bleak pessimism that infests so much of our thinking in this country. He describes a conference with a group of Indian Congress legislators in which he propounded the question: "What could we as Christians and missionaries do in independent India?" The reply was given in three sentences which I quote: (1) "You must get rid of the suspicion that you are not really behind independence, that you do not want to see it come". That was satisfactorily met. (2) "Concerning the right of the individual to change his faith: where it is based on real conviction we have no question; but doubts arise when we come to the matter of mass conversion where these conversions may be used to build up communal power for political purposes." That is the recurring decimal in these anti-missionary charges and we must do our best to equate it. (3) "You must offer no inducement of a material nature to induce people to become Christians." That reveals a deep-rooted suspicion and, at the same time, a complete misunderstanding of Christian principles and Christian practices; but more than vocal repudiation is needed: we must see to it that our practice squares with our principle.

With characteristic enterprise Dr. Jones carried his enquiry to higher quarters and put it to four leaders whose names are household words in India. To those who find it fashionable to disparage these Indian leaders let me quote this fine saying by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru: "Yes, we are small men, but we are joined to great causes".

(1) Here, then, is Sardar Vallabhai Patel, the present Home Member in the Government of India and regarded as its strong man, speaking. "Let missionaries go on as they have been going on, let them serve the suffering with their hospitals and dispensaries, educate the poor and give selfless service to the people. They can even carry on their propaganda in a peaceful manner. But let them not use mass conversion for political ends. If they do this there is certainly a place for them in India. We want them to throw themselves in with India, identify themselves with the people and make India their home". That was explicit enough.

(2) Mr. C. Rajagopalachari, the well-known South India statesman and now Governor of the Bengal Province in the Dominion of India, said the same things in more diplomatic language: "While I agree that you have the right of conversion I would suggest that in this crisis when religion is dividing us, it would be better strategy to dim conversions and serve the people in various ways until the situation returns to a more normal state." In reply to the supplementary question, "Will the missionary be tolerated or welcomed as partners in this new India?" he answered: "If they take some of the attitudes I suggest then they will not only be welcomed, they will be welcomed with gratitude for what they have done and will do."

(3) The third leader to whom Dr. Jones made his approach was Moulana Abul Kalam Azad, the distinguished Moslem scholar and respected Minister of Education in the Government of India. Asked whether missionaries would be tolerated or welcomed as partners in the new India, he replied: "Do not use the word 'tolerate'; there is no thought of that. You will be welcomed. There is no point at issue with the missionaries, except at one point; at the place of mass conversions where there is no real change of heart. We believe in the right of outer change where there is inner change; but where masses are brought over without any perceptible change then it arouses suspicion as to motive. But apart from that we have no point at issue."

(4) The fourth and most important leader to whom Dr. Jones put his question was Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, whom Mr. Gandhi called "the uncrowned King of India", and this is the answer he gave: "I am not sure as to what is involved in being looked on as partners. But we will welcome anyone who throws

himself into India and makes India his home." These statements are explicit enough and have in them the ring of sincerity; but as old wise Jack Bunsby said to his friend Captain Cuttle, "The point of that observation lies in its application". "What about Mahatma Gandhi?" some will ask. The anti-missionary bee in his bonnet was proselytising; but once in my hearing he said: "If a man, or group of men come forward voluntarily and intelligently for Christian baptism I can say nothing against it." But he entered the characteristic caveat: "I cannot conceive of that happening." Well, we cannot predict the future; but whatever upheavals may come we know that Christianity has in it the quality of survival. It is a movement rather than an institution and we cannot believe it will fade out with the passing of British rule in India.

As I close I cannot do better than pass on this word from Stanley Jones. "The fact of the matter is that the greatest hour of Christian opportunity has come to India. I have never had such a hearing in forty years as I have had in these last six months in India. The tensions have been let down. The combativeness against the Christian Faith has been eased into an attitude of wistful yearning, hoping that the Christians have some answer to the problems that confront us."

This, finally, I must say: the Future of Christianity in Independent India is indissolubly joined to the future of Christianity in the world. Christianity has a Message of incalculable value to give to men and women the world over, and in the giving of that Message the Church in India has an indispensable part to play. The Church in India is no isolated religious community: it is a colony of heaven, a branch of Christ's Universal Church, an outreach of the Kingdom of God, and it is our duty as it is our privilege to share its joys and sorrows, its ardours and its purposes, its set-backs and advances, while ever showing respect to the convictions of those who worship at other than Christian shrines. Whatever betide, the Church in India and the Church in Great Britain, which is the heart and brain of Christianity in these lands, will fulfil its essential purpose as it remains loyal to its Lord's Commission, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature", inspired and fortified by His good and inflexible word of promise: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

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