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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

Christian and Non-Christian Faith

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In the life and witness of the Church there seems little concern today for proclaiming the Gospel to all men, for confronting men with the claims of Jesus Christ as the one hope of the world in these days of perplexing insecurity about human destiny and the prevailing confusion brought on by the collapse of culture and conflict of ideologies.

There are many reasons for this lack of evangelistic enthusiasm among us. One is that Christians seem to be pre-occupied with the more immediate need for consolidation; they are interested chiefly in husbanding their own resources and strengthening the fellowship of the Church that it may withstand contemporary forces which threaten its freedom and security.

Another reason is that all Christians do not adequately realize the challenge and relevancy of the Gospel for the times and the people of their day; they themselves need to experience the truth that in Jesus Christ alone is the one sure hope for the world.

A third reason, which has special bearing on Christians of the Younger Churches, is that they do not have a clear understanding of the relation of Christianity to other religions, of the Gospel to which they testify and the religions of the people among whom they live and work. As Christians of the third and fourth generation they are confused by the claims and counter-claims of non-Christians who now speak with a new assurance and conscious vitality.

KRAEMER'S CONTRIBUTION AT TAMBARAM

The question of the Christian Message to the non-Christian world was brought to the fore at the Tambaram meeting of the International Missionary Council (1938) due in great measure to the stimulating book on that subject by Dr. Hendrik Kraemer. Further study was made in the first volume of the Tambaram Reports, entitled *The Authority of the Faith*, but since then, for various reasons, nothing more was done to continue the discussion. Efforts are now being made to revive interest in this study, especially since the Devos consultation (1956), and the publication of Kraemer's second book early this year.

What emerged at Tambaram has certainly influenced Christian thinking on the subject of non-Christian faiths and evangelism. For one thing, we have all come to appreciate the distinction which Dr. Kraemer then made between Christianity as an historical religion among other religions and the Gospel which is at the core of our creed. We see now that Biblical revelation is *sui generis*, in that it concerns God's initiative for the redemption of men in the person of Our Lord, and that as such it should not be confused with what is called 'revelation' in other religious thought.

Moreover, since every religion is a system of ideas and practices which together constitutes a whole, any 'relation' subsisting among them should be assessed in their totality as systems, and not in terms of a 'relation' established by comparison of particular ideas and practices isolated from the whole of which they form part.

Yet another factor entered into the discussion to which attention was drawn by Dr. A. G. Hogg. He pointed out that while there are non-Christian religious systems which we describe as other faiths there is also what may be called non-Christian faith, which is a very real fact to reckon with in the lives of devout individual adherents of other religions. It is to such faith that we are called to witness with conviction of the uniqueness and finality of the revelation in Jesus Christ.

The Christian attitude to other religions is one thing, and quite another thing is the relation of the faith in the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ whom we proclaim to the faith in God which is indeed the foundation of non-Christian belief. On the one hand, we may not compromise on the absoluteness of the Christian revelation in which alone is salvation for all men, and, on the other, we must indicate with sympathetic insight the significance of the redemptive power of the Gospel to the men of faith in all faiths, interpreting its claims as supremely challenging and relevant to the concrete problems of life which we meet in our world today.

CHRISTIANITY AS ANOTHER RELIGION

'Empirical Christianity', the historical faith-system of ideas and practices, has grown through the centuries. It has developed in the process a characteristic theology, a distinctive ethic and an organized fellowship which worships together in local congregations according to a generally accepted order of faith. Every historical religion, in like manner, has its own specific creed, its cultus and its culture, all of which have taken centuries to shape into an interrelated, characteristic pattern. So that it would be unfair to any religion if we regarded, as by itself alone, any one idea or practice which is part of its creed, cultus and culture. This is a temptation to which many good religious people are subject, especially when they are anxious to effect a comparison

or establish a relation. This total nature of religion is specially marked in the case of modern 'substitute religions' such as Communism and Secularism.

To look, then, for difference or resemblance, we must take a total view of each historical religious system. The fundamental difference between Christianity and other religions, from this approach, is to be found in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In Him, God has disclosed His purpose for His world. In Him, He has declared His loving intention to forgive those who turn to Him in repentance for transgressing His will. Such forgiven sinners He reclaims as His children so that this entire creation may finally be transformed into a new heaven and a new earth.

This is the good news of the Kingdom of God as the ultimate destiny of world-life, the one sure hope for all mankind, declared in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Him 'the Word was made flesh'. The Gospel, thus, stands for something which God has done for man. About this 'doing' of God there is a once-for-allness which gives it a finality; because it is an incident in human history which surpasses any other it is unique; and because it is all of God and His doing there is about it a self-authentication which is of the nature of absolute truth.

When we say, then, that Jesus Christ is unique, that the Incarnation is final and that the Christian claim is to absolute truth, we are not merely referring to Jesus of Nazareth as a unique man among men; nor do we imply that through Him God has given a body of teachings which is, as it were, His final word about salvation; much less do we make pretence of claim to absolute truth for 'empirical Christianity,' for all that constitutes the Christian system of thought and practice, its creed, its cultus and its culture. What we do say is that God's revelation of His purpose for the world of men in Christ Jesus is unique, final and absolute. And it is this Gospel, this good news of God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself that we preach. As Dr. Hogg has well put it, 'Christianity is unique because of the unique content of the revelation of which it is the apprehension and product, and to which it bears witness'.

UNIQUE CONTENT OF CHRISTIAN REVELATION

This implies that Christianity as system of ideas and practices has grown around this revelation, informed by it but nevertheless constructed by exercise of human thought and language interpreting the experience of this revelation. Christianity is never free from the danger of human error in its efforts to give form and expression to its essential Gospel-content.

So there is persistent need to be constantly checking up the creed, the cultus and the culture of the Christian religion with reference to the Gospel. God's gift of the Holy Spirit was given us with this intention, that He may teach us, leading us in the way of truth and setting us free from the natural human tendency to falsehood.

Evangelism is the two-fold movement of Christian faith, reaching out in testimony to the truth we have found in Christ and growing inward in experience of the truth that we have been found of God in Christ. For our religion comes as much under the judgement of the Gospel as any other religion.

Compared as a religion among religions, the divergence between Christianity and other faiths will strike the eye where its creed is concerned, for our creed seeks to formulate in conceptual expressions our understanding of the Gospel, and it is there, in the Gospel, that non-Christians will find the 'scandal', the totally unacceptable claims of Christianity.

But it is not impossible that, in the realms of culture and cultus, Christians in the lands of the Younger Churches find a measure of affinity with the non-Christian peoples among whom we live, of whom we form part. Nevertheless whatever we take over from other religions, whether of thought or practice, consciously or unconsciously, needs to be baptized into Christ, made over anew by the Gospel, so completely changed in meaning that it accords with the creed of our faith. Only thus can we avoid the persistent danger of syncretism, on the one hand, and the equally insidious evil of remaining alien in our life and unintelligible in our conversation as Christians with non-Christians.

NON-CHRISTIAN MEN OF FAITH

There are non-Christian men of faith whose profound religious experience commands our sincere reverence. It is not for us to say whether or not God has met and made known His loving purpose to them also, although in their seeking for God they have not been confronted by Christ. It may even be that they have, in fact, rejected His claims. It is difficult to hold that all non-Christian faith is purely a human quest for God, and that in all such 'seeking' there is no 'finding' or 'being found'.

A genuinely responsive condition of faith on the part of man in his quest for God cannot fail to find favour with Him. Therefore, we may not agree that there is no revelation of God at all except in Christianity. To quote Dr. Hogg again, 'Whether to Christian faith or non-Christian, God reveals Himself; He does not reveal ready-made truths about Himself. And the thought and language in which a man expresses to himself or others his apprehensions of that supernatural self-disclosure has to be human thought, human language always defective, sometimes gravely distorting'.

There is, however, one serious lack in all non-Christian faith: there is little of that amazing joy and sense of release which wells out of the stupendous awareness of sins forgiven. The reason is obvious. It is due to the characteristic background of non-Christian ideas, the peculiar meaning attributed to salvation, the whole perspective of non-Christian faith being conditioned by an altogether different view of life and human destiny.

Therefore, the primary task of evangelism in non-Christian countries is to challenge such faith in God which does not reckon with the fact of sin and consequent need for forgiveness, and not merely repudiate the validity of such faith. Only a shattering realization of human sinfulness and God's dealing with it in Jesus Christ can break down all barriers between God and man, establish anew that two-way commerce of love and of obedience between the Father and the Children of His adoption. So our Lord said, 'No man cometh unto the Father but by Me,' and again, 'Neither doth any man know the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal Him.'

Such experience, possible only in Christ, is revolutionary. It completely repatterns the whole background of ideas in non-Christian faith and furnishes a new standpoint from where the act of God in Christ acquires a new meaning. But does this mean that the faith in God of deeply religious men who are not convicted of sin and see no need for forgiveness is entirely unrelated to the faith of forgiven sinners, such as we Christians are, who have been restored to a sense of fellowship so devastatingly new that we can describe it only as a new creation?

OUR EVANGELISTIC CONCERN

We may not forget that God Himself is at work to awaken men of faith in other religions too, teaching men to know and love Him as He is, the Father of our Lord Jesus. Where human apprehension of His mind and purpose is distorted, He too is patiently at work undoubtedly, 'enabling men to apprehend conceptually, without a radical degree of distortion, His perfect expression of Himself towards all men in the medium of action and personality'.

Christians of our generation need to hold to the trust in a Father God who yearns for fellowship with feeble men and that He is forever eager to bestow on those who turn to Him the heritage of sonship, 'the privilege of the ages to come'. Besides, it is true, as Dr. Kraemer observes in another context, 'not the consciousness of sin brings men to Christ, but the continued contact with Christ brings them to consciousness of sin'.

Our task is to bring these men of faith to confront the living Christ. And when He quickens them too, as He did most of us, who began our spiritual pilgrimage from within the Church, to perceive the terrific reality of sin, nothing suffices but the Crucified Saviour and the Risen Lord.

Our evangelistic concern in men of non-Christian faith is given an added sense of urgency and responsibility in that we are in a real way labourers together with God. We need to exercise with greater courage and informed insight the prophetic ministry of courageously indicating in the concrete and actual situations of life the devastating effects of human sinfulness and self-righteousness and mistrust of God in our day.

We need to show how non-Christian faith in God is precariously based on doctrinal views of man and the world which do not reckon with realities, by confronting non-Christian ideas and practices with the truth as we know it in Jesus Christ. We need further to come closer together with men of non-Christian faith, and on the plane of living fellowship make them see for themselves in our own lives that blessedness whereunto 'the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'.

It may not be for us to say that God in His graciousness will not reward the faith of the non-Christian seeker who continues to stay outside the fold, but we press forward with the mission of testimony which has been delivered to us declaring to the end of time that there is no other Name given under heaven by which men shall be saved except the Name of Jesus Christ. For it remains true for all time that 'when Christ succeeds in unveiling for any man the judgement of God on sin, in this very act He cannot help making Himself for that man, the one and only way'.

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In India there have been prophets and teachers who have prepared the way for Christ, not in the sense that anything they have written refers prophetically to any particular word or deed of His, but in the sense that they have trained the people in noble ways of living and taught them by word and example receptiveness to the ministry of Jesus. The Rsis, Bhaktas and Yogins of India have striven hard to make the people respond to the summons of Christ when it is uttered. It may be asked in what sense the people of India have been prepared for the coming of Christ. There are many utterances of the seers in India which dwell upon the necessity for a teacher to lead and guide us. They point out that real progress in religion is possible only with the help of a spiritual teacher which is far more effective than reading. Though these utterances refer only to human teachers, their insistence on the necessity of personal guidance finds its highest fulfilment in the supreme religious teacher, Jesus Christ.

There are elements in the ancient Scriptures of India which have to be fearlessly given up. But there are also many doctrines and ideals in them which have to be as zealously assimilated and carried on to their natural culmination in Christ. If Jesus blamed His contemporaries for not listening to the voice of Moses, with equal power and vehemence will He condemn us for not listening to Rāmānuja, Mānikkavācakar, Tukārām, Kabir and Chaitanya who have left behind them teaching of such undying value, pointing the way to Christ.