

The Modern Revival of the Non-Christian Religions

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This theme may seem rather remote from the problems of the average Parish in England, whether in town or country. But today the world is a unity, as never before; and what happens in Africa or the East may vitally affect life in a Lancashire mill or a Cheshire parish. Nor are 'non-Christian religions' now confined to far-off lands; in some forms they are active in this country. So, if there is a revival among them, it may well call for our attention in England.

There has certainly been a significant change, of late, in the attitude of the non-Christian religions towards Christianity. Broadly, this is a change from 'defence' to 'attack'. Thirty years ago, Dr. Kraemer realized this:

'Everywhere, in Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, etc., there is manifest a heightening of religious group-consciousness, embodying itself in movements for reform, propaganda and concerted opposition to Christian missions.'
(*The Christian Message*, p. 46.)

This is evident, if we compare the policy of outstanding non-Christian leaders a century ago with that of their successors today. Ram Mohun Roy in Hinduism, and Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan in Islam, while defending the adequacy of their own religions for their own people, spoke of Christ with admiration, and commended his teachings to the young men of their own faith. Today, the leading spokesmen of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam are confidently asserting that they have something *better* than Christianity to offer to the world. The great Buddhist Missionary Campaign of 1956 was on a scale previously without parallel. In Colombo, a huge flood-lit image of the Buddha bore the caption: '*This is the True Light of the World!*' Although no mass-conversions have been reported, the effects of all this, even in the West, are not negligible. Chaplains of schools and colleges in England have lately told me that sixth-form boys and undergraduates have started 'Buddhist Societies', numbering in each case a dozen or a score. Moreover, Theosophy, Vedantism and

the 'Wisdom Cults' are spreading—probably more than most of us realize.

This brings a challenge to the Church—sometimes openly hostile, sometimes in the form of a friendly appeal: 'Will you Christians not abandon your *exclusive* claims, and join with us in the vital struggle against Materialistic Communism and Scientific Scepticism?' To ignore or evade this challenge would be most unwise. For the Church today is no longer in the position of generally-recognized superiority which she once held. Dr. Max Warren has said that the hymn 'Onward, Christian Soldiers!' and specially the words

'Like a mighty army
Moves the Church of God!'

need to be revised today, because the Church is more like a 'Resistance-Movement' operating in enemy territory, than an all-conquering army. Bishop Berggraev has recently appealed to Church-leaders to consider whether a drastic revision of our whole conception of 'Missions' is not an urgent necessity today, in view of the new challenge to the Church.

But what *should* be the answer of the Church to this challenge?

Some would reply by a vigorous counter-attack. They maintain that the non-Christian religions are the enemies of Christianity, to be destroyed, and replaced by the One True Faith. That view is held today by many missionaries of 'Fundamentalist' sympathies, and by 'Continental' of the Barthian school. It was in the past the view of Tertullian, of Luther and Calvin, of nearly all the great pioneer-missionaries; and it is implied in the military metaphors of most of our missionary hymns.

But of late it has been widely deprecated, as being both ineffective and morally wrong. The late Bishop Cash of Worcester (a former missionary to Muslims) came to the conclusion that 'controversy is *futile* as a line of missionary approach'. (*Christendom and Islam*, p. 10.) Moreover, many missionaries feel that controversial attacks on the faith of others are not in accord with the spirit and example of Our Lord, and all too often lead to misrepresentation and unfair judgments; nor can they reconcile a *wholesale* condemnation of other religions with what they have seen in the lives of non-Christians, or what they have read in their sacred books. So the controversial method has become less prevalent in missionary circles today.

Others would reply to the challenge with an admission that there are good elements in other religions, but would claim that all these (together with much else of value) are to be found in the Gospel of Christ. That was the view of Justin Martyr, and the Alexandrian philosophers Clement and Origen; it has been the predominant view in missions of the 'Catholic' type; it was advocated in 1840 by Frederick Denison Maurice and at greater

length (in 1907) in a volume entitled *Mankind and the Church*, by a group of Anglican missionary-bishops.

In the early years of this century, this view became predominant in missionary circles. It combined a kindly (if somewhat patronizing) attitude to other religions with an uncompromising affirmation of the supremacy and finality of Christianity. But of late, it has been subjected to searching criticism, on the ground that

- (1) Hinduism and Buddhism are based on principles so different from those of Judaism and Christianity that the former cannot be 'fulfilled' in the latter; and
- (2) That Islam (later in origin than Christianity), so far from being 'fulfilled' in the Gospel, claims that the Gospel finds its 'fulfilment' in the Qu'ran.

Dr. Kraemer, in particular, has denounced the idea that other religions are 'fulfilled' in Christianity as 'abhorrent'—except perhaps with regard to Judaism (*Continuity*, p. 5).

Dr. Kraemer himself advocates another response to the challenge. He deprecates any attempt either to *condemn* or *commend* the non-Christian religions, and would have the missionary simply present the Gospel as something 'entirely other', having no 'point of contact' with any non-Christian religion. Whether they are 'good' or 'bad' is beside the point; for in any case, they stand quite *apart from* God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ; and no *comparison* between the two is possible, for one cannot compare two things that have nothing in common.

This view, that the Biblical Revelation is completely 'discontinuous' from all other religious experience, is widely held on the Continent, and rests on the doctrine that God is 'entirely other' than man, and the Incarnation of God in Christ 'entirely other' than God's work in History or Nature. But in England, and in the Churches of the 'Catholic Tradition', where the Incarnation has often been regarded as 'the supremely characteristic act of the universal activity of God' (Canon Quick), this 'Theory of Discontinuity' has been widely criticized, as being inconsistent with the teaching of Our Lord, who constantly *likened* the Kingdom of God to human life in his parables, and bade us think of God under the human image of 'Our Father'. It also seems inconsistent with the undeniable *resemblance* between many of the doctrines and practices of Christianity and those of other religions. Dr. Kraemer entitles his view 'Biblical Realism'; but is it, in fact, either 'Biblical' or 'Realistic'?

If then no one of the above answers to the challenge of the non-Christian religions is wholly satisfactory, what alternative remains? I have no 'ready-made' programme to propound; but I would suggest a few considerations which may point the way towards the right course to follow:

(1) We should firmly refuse to follow Dr. Kraemer when he would have us to abandon the attempt to *compare* our faith with others. Certainly we should always remember that our human judgments are liable to error. But to refuse to exercise our reason and our moral judgment in such matters would be to neglect a trust that God has given us. Our Lord himself constantly appealed to his hearers to use their own judgment (Mark 14:24, Luke 12:57, John 7:24). A sober comparison of Christ with other teachers, and of his message with theirs, will, I believe, in the long run, convince the majority of thoughtful men and women of the supremacy of the Christian Faith, and will gradually discredit the 'special pleading' which marks a good deal of non-Christian propaganda today.

In all such comparisons, we must be scrupulously fair. Sometimes, Christians have selected the *finest* elements in Christianity and have set these alongside the worst corruptions of other religions. That is *not* 'judging righteous judgement'.

(2) Our claims for the supremacy of Christ must be substantiated by showing the supremacy of Christian living *in practice*. Dr. Radhakrishnan once said to me: 'You know, most of your Christians seem to us to be very ordinary people making very extraordinary claims for their religion!' Here is a penetrating challenge, which we have no right either to evade or to resent; though for my part, I do not find it easy to answer. For while I have found that *real* Christians of the best type are *finer* men and women than *any* non-Christians that I have met, it seems to me that the *average* level of professing Christians and church-goers, both in England and in India, is not, in character and spirit, *unmistakably* higher than that of the world outside. And as long as that is the case, the world is likely to form its estimate of Christianity by the *lives* of the majority of its adherents, rather than by the *claims* they make on its behalf.

(3) If we take Our Lord's teaching and example as our standard, we shall (I think) avoid *wholesale* condemnation (or commendation) of either systems of religion or their adherents; because in almost all cases there is a mixture of good and evil. Christ dealt with each individual on a *personal* basis; and we should approach a non-Christian, not first with the thought 'he (or she) is a Hindu, or a Muslim', but rather 'one whose welfare and salvation is dear to the heart of God'. And when reading the non-

Christian Scriptures, we may well bear in mind Archbishop W. Temple :

‘ By the Word of God, Isaiah, Plato, Zoroaster, Buddha, and Confucius uttered and wrote such truths as they declared. There is only One Divine Light.’ (*Readings in St. John’s Gospel*, 1, p. 10.)

Finally, what shall we reply to the invitation to join with the non-Christian religions in inter-religious co-operation against Materialism and Scepticism? In the past, very few Christians have been prepared to contemplate the possibility of this, or to admit that other religions may have a distinctive contribution to make towards a fuller understanding of Truth. This was, however, implied in the hymn by the blind poet-mystic, George Matheson, of the Church of Scotland :

‘ Gather us in, Thou Love that fillest all ;
Gather our rival faiths within thy fold !’

(*Note* : ‘ Gather us in ’ ; not ‘ Gather them in ’.)

And Albert Schweitzer has urged that Christian and non-Christian ‘ should move towards a way of thinking which shall eventually be shared in common by all mankind ’. (*Life*, by G. Seaver, p. 276.)

Such views have so far received little support from leaders of the Church. But for myself, I should not wish to close the door against experiments in inter-religious fellowship, both in social service, conference, and worship. We shall need to guard against good-natured compromise, and superficial assent to formulas that cover deep-rooted differences ; and we should refuse to assent in advance to dogmas such as ‘ that all religions are essentially the same, or at least of equal value ’. But, given on both sides a sincerely open mind, and a readiness to accept guidance from the Spirit of God, I believe that inter-religious co-operation is consistent with the mind of Christ and with the main message of the Bible ; bearing in mind these great texts :

‘ If God has given to them the like gift of the Spirit as to us—who are we, that we should withstand God ? ’ (cf. Acts 11 : 17.)

‘ Be ready to render unto every man a reason for the faith that is in you ; yet with meekness and fear.’ (1 Peter 3 : 15.)

‘ Prove all things ; hold fast that which is good.’ (1 Thess. 5 : 21.)