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Review Article

IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

S. ESTBORN

Can we take the Biblical message seriously? Can we accept the Biblical teaching that man is a fallen being, rebellious against God, and that Christ is God's way of reconciling man to Himself? To address these questions to a Christian seems to be to answer them. For, it seems, the Christian answer can be but one.

This is the standpoint taken by Dr. H. Kraemer in his two major works *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, written for the International Missionary Council's Conference at Tambaram in 1938, and *Religion and the Christian Faith*, published in 1956. In both he is wrestling with the question: What consequence does this standpoint have for our attitude to non-Christian religions?

The background of the Tambaram book was Hocking's *Rethinking Missions, a Layman's Inquiry after a hundred years*, published in America in the early 1930's. This book worked as a bombshell in the missionary world, because it placed Christianity and non-Christian religions more or less on the same level, and made Christian mission merely a mission of culture and goodwill. With this book, and the situation created by it, in mind Dr. Kraemer wrote his book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. It acted, in his own judgement, 'as another bombshell' (*Religion and the Christian Faith*, p. 224). Seldom has a book roused such heated discussion as did this book, before, during and after the great conference. The present reviewer remembers a missionary gathering in Madras shortly before the conference, when the then General Secretary of the International Missionary Council, William Paton, was here to give the last touch to the preparations of the conference. Dr. Paton said: 'If your group is not divided on Kraemer, it is unique in the whole universe.'

To a certain extent the new book is a scrutiny of and a reply to the critics of the first book, and a re-examination of the standpoint taken then. Dr. Kraemer explains that his 'standing-place' was 'misunderstood by many and misinterpreted as narrowness of mind, dogmatism, even fundamentalism' (*Religion and the Christian Faith*, p. 222).

His 'standing-place', certainly, is a watershed dividing two river systems of religious thinking. The question is this:

comparing the Christian faith and non-Christian religions, shall we take our stand, so to say, outside and above them all, including the Christian faith, and from that neutral point of view attempt an objective evaluation of them all, including the Christian faith; or, shall we, as Christians, take our stand within the Christian faith, and from there examine and evaluate the non-Christian religions (and religious philosophies)? The latter alternative seems to represent dogmatism and narrowness, the former, on the other hand, seems commendable, not only for its generosity and broadmindedness, but, above all, for its objectivity; from a scientific point of view it alone seems possible.

Yet, is it possible? A comparison and evaluation requires a criterion and standard measure according to which the compared objects are to be measured and valued. Is there such a criterion and standard measure available in the world of religion? Is it perhaps to be found in the 'natural religion' of the Deists, or in Schleiermacher's 'feeling of absolute dependence', in Soederblom's and Otto's 'idea of the Holy', in Hoeffding's 'belief in the indestructibility of value' or in Nygren's 'category of eternity'—just to mention a few modern proposals? They are all different from one another; some of them are obviously of purely formal character, and can therefore not be, and are not intended to be, standard measures of empirical religions. The quintessence of religion which the Deists called 'natural religion' was definitely so intended, but modern science of religion is unanimous that it was a mere abstraction and therefore fallacious as a standard measure, and Dr. Kraemer is certainly right in pointing out that there is no such thing as a universal 'essence of all religions'. There is only a universal religious consciousness manifesting itself in a great variety of different religions. A scientific evaluation of religions by this method is therefore not possible.

On the other hand, it should be possible to evaluate a religion from the point of view of another religion, using the latter one as a criterion and standard measure of religious values. But can such an evaluation be objective and scientific? Yes, it should be possible to state objectively how customs, beliefs and doctrines of one religion must be valued from the point of view of another. Provided such a comparison and evaluation is made on the basis of methodical and critical research of the same calibre and kind as every scholar uses, it certainly can have the right of claiming to be scientific. What is needed, in addition to scholarly training and method and a thorough knowledge of the subject, is a sense for religious realities, a psychological ability to understand another's mind, and a sincere intention to be fair and objective. That one always must make allowance for a certain amount of subjectivity is a fate which the science of religion shares with all other sciences, even natural science.

Which religion a person believes in and consequently will use as a standard measure is a different issue. This is not a matter of science, nor of the intellect alone, but a matter of decision and

choice in which intellect, feeling, will, intuition, the whole personality are involved.

Now the question comes: can a convinced and sincere Christian choose any other criterion and standard than Christ? Dr. Kraemer complains that his critics wanted him to take a neutral, 'objective', view—as if a Christian has the possibility and the right to have a "standing-place" whence he may judge Jesus Christ! (op. cit., p. 145).

Does this mean, then, that a Christian may say: 'Christ is my standard, the Hindu and the Muslim may have their standards, the one may be as good and true as the other'? Of course not. Truth is but one. If I am convinced that Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, I cannot accept anything as true which does not agree with Christ. This, however, does not imply that a Christian must condemn or reject everything non-Christian as untrue, but it does imply that he will and must examine, judge and evaluate every religious experience, practice and teaching *in the light of Christ*.

In regard to the evaluation of the pluriform religious life of mankind in the light of the Christian Revelation, the crucial question, says Dr. Kraemer, is this: 'Are the various religions (philosophies, life-conceptions) of mankind places of encounter between man and God, or are they not? Or to put it differently: Are they responses to a divine activity, or are they not?' (op. cit., p. 6).

When Dr. Kraemer wrote his Tambaram book he took the standpoint that, though God may have been wrestling with man at every time and everywhere in order to turn him and establish contact with him, it is almost impossible to indicate systematically and concretely where God revealed Himself and wrestled and wrestles with man in non-Christian religions. His main concern then was to show that non-Christian religions chiefly must be regarded as man's achievement to assert himself in his attempt 'to be like God'. He was therefore inclined to deny the existence of any 'point of contact' between the non-Christian religions and the Christian faith, and he insisted that there could be no talk of Christ as the 'fulfilment' of non-Christian religions as Dr. Farquhar had advocated in his famous book *The Crown of Hinduism*. Dr. Kraemer stressed that the Christian faith necessarily implied the 'discontinuity' of the non-Christian religions. This view he maintained and explained further in his contribution to the book *The Authority of the Faith* in the 'Tambaram Series', published after the conference.

It was especially on this point that he was severely criticized. He now admits that he 'too one-sidedly characterized the religions as human performances and achievements, good or bad, and dealt with them too unilaterally as purely human products' (op. cit., p. 316). By focusing his attention on the religious consciousness as the place of God's wrestling with man, he now gives, in his new book, more room to express definite opinions (though

admittedly always open to revision) on the results of this divine-human encounter in non-Christian religions. He maintains, however, that this encounter always has a 'dialectic' character, in a double sense: on the one hand God's dealing with man is always one of judgement and grace, and on the other hand man's response is always either negative, or only partly positive and partly negative, or distortedly positive. This gives to the non-Christian religions an 'ambivalent' character of 'yes and no', of good and bad; there cannot, therefore, be the slightest deviation from the chief principle that all non-Christian religious experience, teaching and practice must be examined and evaluated in the light of the Christian Revelation.

It should be noted, however, that he does not say 'in the light of Christianity'. Dr. Kraemer lays emphasis on the distinction between empirical Christianity (with its doctrines, organizations and practices) and the Christian Revelation, i.e. God's self-disclosure in Christ. Empirical Christianity, as well as the non-Christian religions, is subject to examination and evaluation in the light of Christ.

This divine self-disclosure in the historical Christ, the man Jesus of Nazareth, as recorded and interpreted in the New Testament, and prepared for in a series of divine acts recorded in the Old Testament, is *the* Revelation of God. There is only *one* revelation, not one 'general' and one 'special'. Dr. Kraemer dislikes the idea of a general revelation, because it leads to the idea of a 'natural theology' apart from the theology of the Christian Revelation. He suggests a new terminology and speaks of other 'modes' of revelation: God's eternal power, divinity and wrath are disclosed in nature, in historical human life and activity, and in human consciousness (Rom. 1 and 2). But whenever and wherever God is actively disclosing Himself out of direct personal concern for man for the creative re-establishment of the relation of God with man, this revelation is 'special' and in essential agreement with His self-disclosure in Christ. Hence the necessity of testing the claims of all such experiences in the light of Christ.

From this radically Biblical 'standing-place' Dr. Kraemer examines a number of interpretations of revelation, Christian and non-Christian.

With non-Christian interpretations he deals by means of an analysis of Dr. Radhakrishnan as a representative of Hindu thinking. He has no quarrel with Dr. Radhakrishnan on the score that he wants to interpret Hinduism to the West. It is certainly his right to believe in Hinduism and to advocate it. But Dr. Kraemer has other axes to grind with him. First, he is not a true and reliable interpreter of Hinduism. He has appropriated a number of Christian ideas and ideals which he pretends to belong to the Hindu heritage, and he uses so much language derived from genuinely Christian spiritual climate and vocabulary, that 'it is not severe to say: words, words! They

cannot, logically speaking, have any real content, because within the context and spirit of the Indian *philosophia perennis* they are entirely 'incongruous' (op. cit., 128f.) 'The *arthaśāstras* of India are far more trustworthy sources for understanding and appreciating Hindu views on economic, social, political and cultural life than Radhakrishnan's "Hindu View of Life", which is a distorted picture of the reality of the past and the present' (op. cit., p. 131).

Further, Radhakrishnan's treatment of Christianity is far from objective. His dislike for Christianity is obvious. 'Of course, it is his right to dislike Christianity if he chooses to do so. One might even add that a Christian from the West should accept his dislike and misunderstanding humbly as an act of just retribution for the many Western treatments of Hinduism which have manifested deep misunderstanding and biased dislike. Yet, the right remains to expect from a man of Radhakrishnan's standing and ability a style of conduct which conforms more closely to his pretension of Indian tolerance and rare gift of comprehensive charity. Radhakrishnan's claim for all-inclusiveness breaks down on Christianity' (op. cit., p. 129f.).

Yet, Dr. Kraemer's chief criticism of Radhakrishnan is that he advocates Hindu mysticism as the truest and highest form of religion, in the name of the science of religion. It is Radhakrishnan's right to think that Hindu mysticism is the religion *par excellence*, but he should know that 'this is after all, just as the central emphasis of Christianity on revelation and faith, a primary decision, an *a priori*, and not a proven case' (op. cit., p. 133).

Dr. Kraemer, however, has also a bill to settle with philosophy (philosophy of religion, religious philosophy, philosophical life-conceptions). He does so, at the end of the book, in the form of an analysis of Paul Tillich's attempt at a reconciliation of (ontological) philosophy and the Christian faith. Tillich's main argument that these two have two essential things in common, viz. passion for truth, and doubt, is totally rejected on the ground that these similarities are merely formal and external. Passion has not the same quality, status and function in philosophy as in faith. In (ontological) philosophy it is always one of the mainsprings of the quest. But faith has nothing to do with such passion, because it is essentially not a quest, but trust in God; it is *Ergriffensein*, being gripped by God. The same is the case with doubt. It is a quite different thing in philosophy than in faith. In philosophy it is a method, and must be methodically exercised; in faith it is a temptation (*Anfechtung*). Tillich's reconciliation therefore breaks down. Faith and philosophy are two incompatibles.

But in addition to, and between these two main targets of attack Dr. Kraemer turns his scrutinizing torch-light also on the whole range of Christian interpreters of the Faith, from the early Apologists and Church-fathers, over the Medieval Schoolmen, and the Reformers to modern theologians and religionists, particularly

Soederblom, 'the Clement of the twentieth century'. He comes to the conclusion that their interpretations are all very valuable, but that they, with the exception of Luther, Calvin and Hamann, are all more or less defective in one point: their orientation is not radically Biblical.

Naturally any reader will put a number of question marks with regard to details. For one thing, Dr. Kraemer seems not to have done full justice to the victims of his severe criticism, particularly not to Tillich and Soederblom. Many, probably, will put a question mark also after his main thesis; but it seems not to be easily overturned, either from a Christian or from a scientific point of view. We had better take his concern for a radically Biblical orientation of our thinking to heart. Of course, we all confess Christ as our Master, as the Way, the Truth and the Life, but are we prepared to take the full consequence of this standpoint with regard to our thinking and teaching? The problem is certainly not unique to our generation, but Dr. Kraemer has renewed a question which the next generation will have to wrestle with seriously.

★

Not Rapture but Love

Not for me is the love that knows no restraint, but like the foaming wine that, having burst its vessel in a moment, would run to waste.

Send me the love which is cool and pure, like your rain that blesses the thirsty earth and fills the homely jars.

Send me the love that would soak down into the centre of being, and from there would spread like the unseen sap through the branching tree of life, giving birth to fruits and flowers.

Send me the love that keeps the heart still with the fulness of peace.

Rabindranath Tagore