

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

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

Christianity as a Historical Religion

M. E. GIBBS

Some months ago, the *Indian Journal of Theology* published a very interesting article by Dr. K. C. Matthew, comparing the anthropologies of Radhakrishnan and Brunner. He rightly pointed out that for Radhakrishnan man's goal is still the realization of his identity with essential self. Although Radhakrishnan allows a far higher value to human personality than the more traditional forms of Hindu philosophy do, his position is, after all, a form of the *advaita* idealism, and is open to the same objections. If individual existence is only a stage in the attainment of realization of oneness with the essential self, the process of history is cyclic and therefore meaningless; and sin loses its moral seriousness, becoming mere ignorance and imperfection. Brunner's theology provides a contrast at all these points. An impassable gulf of difference divides the transcendent God, the Creator, from man His creature, a gulf which can only be passed because God has created man in His image and has revealed Himself to him. Sin is rebellion against God; it involves guilt and pollution and separates man from God. Man can do nothing of himself to put things right; he needs the grace of God; and the effect of this grace is not identity but fellowship with God. So far, all Christians would agree with Brunner against Radhakrishnan; and they would agree too with Brunner's statement that the supreme revelation of God was given through Jesus of Nazareth. So far as it goes, there is no need to quarrel either with Brunner's view that what matters is not so much knowledge about the historical character, Jesus of Nazareth, as the existential encounter with the cosmic Christ. So far as it goes—for the weakness of Brunner's theology appears here. He seems quite incapable of explaining why the cosmic Christ of this all-important encounter should be connected at all with the historical Jesus of Nazareth; and certainly lays himself open to Radhakrishnan's criticism that he only makes such a connection because he has been bred in the Christian tradition. Moreover, Brunner fails as completely as Radhakrishnan does to give any real spiritual significance to history. This is suspicious, because it is in striking contrast to what we find in the Bible. A great deal of the contents of the

Bible is history, comment on history or materials for history. This is very different from the sacred books of other religions, which contain laws, philosophy, hymns and devotional poetry rather than the matter of fact historical narratives of the Bible; and in which even the legends and traditions found in epics and *puranas* are valued more for the lessons they are supposed to teach or for their underlying mystical significance than as records of fact. In order to see just where the inadequacy of Brunner's theology lies, it will be necessary to consider the nature of history and its relation to Christianity.

History is the record of what man has done in the past; but it is not every sort of record. We cannot speak of history in the full sense unless we have some knowledge of individual men and specific events. Thus, our knowledge of the Indus Valley Civilization is at present pre-historic, not historic. As no living tradition of that civilization has survived, and we have no decipherable inscriptions, we can only guess in a general way at its rise and fall; we can tell something of the material conditions of its life, but we can infer little of the thoughts and characters of the men who produced it. We can trace no single personality and follow the course of no single event. We can, as a general rule, only call an event or a period historical when we are enabled to do these things by contemporary or nearly contemporary written evidence, though occasionally we may supplement or substitute for this such carefully and systematically memorized oral traditions as have for centuries existed in India. It is true that very important events may take place, which have affected all subsequent history, but which have left little or no historical record behind them—dimly seen movements of peoples and invasions and conquests and culture-contacts. It is, however, to be noted that, where these things have become the subject of historical record, their effect is the more permanent and profound. A people which has no history but dimly remembered oral traditions is rather like a child who has not yet reached the age of full self-consciousness.

It seems to be fundamental to our thought to suppose that we have explained something when we are able to refer it to a general principle of which it is an example. This is a corollary to the belief which is shared by all peoples who have risen to the level of philosophical thought, that there is some underlying principle of unity behind the world of phenomena. In its extreme form, this issues in the mathematician's ambition to sum up the whole of phenomenal existence in one complicated equation. Even when this has been done, however, the phenomena which it exists to explain have not been explained away; they continue to exist as really as ever, in their own stubborn individuality and particularity. When we come to the applied sciences, and especially to biology, we find that something of the same is true. By observation and experiment we classify phenomena and establish the natural laws by which they work; but the fact of

individualism and particularism remains, and the higher we go in the scale of existence, the more important it is. One particle seems to differ from another, at least in its life history; but, even if they are of the same breed, one man's dog differs from another man's dog far more, and in a way that is of fundamental importance to their owners. The nearer we approach to the personal level, the more important does the individual and the particular become. History is concerned almost entirely with the personal, and so the generalizations which are the very stuff of natural science are of comparatively little importance for it. History was described by Bacon as a study to make men wise; but the wisdom acquired by historical knowledge is of a different kind from that of the scientist or technician. Scientific knowledge admits of exact prediction and constant repetition. If the electrician is called in to mend a fused wire, if a doctor is confronted with a patient, he is confronted with a situation which he has met before in all its essential aspects; and all he has to do is to repeat the process which he has used before, with the additional skill which comes from practice. History is an example of quite a different kind of learning from experience; and no predictions have proved more wildly wrong than those of learned historians who have failed to realize this, and have ventured to prognosticate the future on the basis of the similarity of the situation before them to some situation in the past. The wisdom taught by history, like all wisdom in dealing with persons which comes from experience, is the result of a greater awareness of all the factors in a complicated situation, not of the application of a prescribed remedy to a recurrent set of symptoms.

Historical evidence resembles the process which a judge has to use to get at the truth of a case brought before him, rather than the method of observation and experiment used in science. The evidence is generally incomplete and often inconclusive. The judge is certain that there is a truth to be known which will explain the facts brought before him, but it is often impossible to establish beyond a peradventure what they are. If a murdered man is found in a lonely house at night, it is quite certain that there must have been a murderer, but unlikely that there was any eye-witness of the deed. The historian is often in a similar position. Moreover, the longer the time that has elapsed since the events in question, the fewer the direct evidences that are likely to remain. We have many more direct evidences of the career of Napoleon Bonaparte, who died a little more than a hundred years ago, than we have of Jesus of Nazareth, who died more than nineteen centuries ago. Must we then say that the evidence for the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth is, by the very nature of the case, weaker than that for Napoleon?

A very important consideration prevents us from coming to this conclusion. It is that real events have real results, real results have real causes. If a murdered body is found, there must have been a murderer; if we are told that one of our friends has just

been seriously injured in a motor accident, and then within half an hour we meet him walking about alive and well, we conclude that the report has been, to say the least of it, exaggerated. Now there can be no doubt of the existence in the contemporary world of the Christian Church. As we trace its history back, we find it exercising a remarkable influence on the history of the world, particularly of Europe. We trace its history back into the first century, and there find its origin recorded in a collection of documents which tell of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The story is a remarkable one, but, if true, it does explain adequately the origin of the Christian Church and the part it has played in the subsequent history of the world. Anyone who refuses to accept it has got to suggest an alternative explanation which will account for all the admitted facts; and this no-one so far has been able to do. We should only have the right to dismiss the New Testament as legendary or imaginary if the events recorded in it had left no effects on the subsequent history of the world.¹

It is possible to trace the history of Christianity back to Jesus Christ because Christianity has been embodied in an organized community, the Christian Church. Such communities are the subject matter of history, and what give it its continuity. Without them, history becomes merely a matter of biographical episodes and isolated events. One reason for the discontinuity and episodic nature of Indian history is the absence of such continuous organized communities. No Indian religion—in fact, no other religion, except, to some extent, Judaism, has a Church in the Christian sense;² the state has been extremely weak in India; famine and war have constantly broken up the continuous existence of village communities; and caste organization, the strongest element of the Indian social structure, has had no historians. What the historical continuity of a community means can be illustrated from the histories of the two oldest and best articulated nation states of western Europe, England and France. A consideration of the history of these two nations may throw some light on the meaning of historical continuity in the Christian Church, and the meaning to be attached to the statement that Christianity is in a special sense a historical religion.

English history has had a remarkable continuity from the English conquest in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. Almost

¹ The events, not the book itself. A book of legendary stories may in fact have a very strong influence, for example, the Ramayana. But it is not possible so far to trace back a single institution or chain of real historic consequences to the events described in the Ramayana.

² In Buddhism, the sangha has very great importance, but this is the monastic community, not the community of all those who profess Buddhism, as the Christian Church is the community of all those who are in Christ. In Islam, in the Islamic state, Church and state are one in a way which can never happen with Christianity. Other religions have priesthoods but the priests are not the officials of the whole community of believers as the Christian clergy are.

all the villages of modern England have had a continuous existence since the tenth century or earlier. This is social and cultural continuity. But there has also been institutional continuity. The English brought with them at the conquest kings claiming divine descent and with a certain rudimentary political authority. The monarchy of Elizabeth II is demonstrably continuous with that of dim early English kings of the period before the English settled in Britain: but in the course of its passage it has undergone protean transformations, and it is the enormous capacity which it has shown for adaptation to circumstances which is the secret of its survival. French history had a similar continuity until the time of the great French Revolution, but this Revolution brought about as complete a break with the traditional institutions of the country as possible. Yet the French nation has not ceased to be identically the same French nation. The continuity of coherent constitutional development has been broken; not that of social and cultural identity.

Does institutional continuity matter? It was the ground of Burke's opposition to the French Revolution that it did, and that the wanton breach of it was bound to be disastrous; the subsequent histories of Britain and France have borne out his judgment. The French Revolution has not opened a new era of success and greatness for France. After the feverish and impermanent triumphs of the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras, her history has been one of declining influence, national division and failure to find any really satisfactory form for her central government.

The history of secular states can throw light on the nature of historic continuity in the Church because every human community, however much defaced by sin, keeps something of the pattern of the divine community of which God is the founder and king. On the other hand, the Church is a society of men in this world, subject to similar conditions and vicissitudes. Just as man himself has a dual nature—as a material being, a member of the animal kingdom and as a spiritual being made in the image of God and capable of fellowship with Him—so the Church has a dual existence. It is an earthly society sharing many of the characteristics of other earthly societies; it is also the Body and Bride of Christ, a colony of heaven, the visible part on earth of the Kingdom of God which is also the communion of saints and the celestial city. As the redeemed community, it is what human society might have been without the fall; it is the perfect society, the pattern to which all human societies ought to approximate.

These are great claims; to substantiate them we turn to the Bible. Here the people of God is one of the great essential themes which run through both Old and New Testaments. In Abraham's seed all the families of the earth are to be blessed. Abraham is chosen not merely as an individual; the choice is to include his descendants. The chosen family becomes

a tribe, then a group of tribes, then a nation and a kingdom. The Israelite monarchy is a curiously ambiguous institution. On the one hand, it represents rebellion against God: 'Ye said unto me, Nay, but a king shall reign over us: when the LORD your God was your king' (1 Samuel 12:12; cf. 1 Samuel 7 and 8). On the other hand, the first clear conception of the Messiah was of an ideal king of David's line. David's own striking character, the long continuance of his dynasty, and the acceptance by the best of his descendants, especially Hezekiah and Josiah, of the teaching of the prophets, made this possible. Even before the exile, the attempt was being made in the temple at Jerusalem to reconcile the priestly religion of sacrifice with the teaching of the prophets. It was not a very easy matter to reconcile priest and prophet in Old Testament times; and some people have interpreted the strong denunciations by the prophets of corrupt temple worship as a condemnation of sacrifice itself, and with it, of institutional religion. This does not seem to have been the case; nor is the progressive revelation to be discerned in the Old Testament to be interpreted as a progress from corporate and institutional to individual religion. It is true that the troubles of Jeremiah taught him an entirely new kind of personal relation with God, and that Ezekiel, called upon to preach to a company of displaced persons—Jewish exiles in Babylon—had to lay an entirely new stress on individual responsibility (Ezekiel 12:18). But this did not involve any repudiation of corporate and institutional religion, and Ezekiel's prophecy ends with a vision of the restored temple and holy city. Society and the individual are not contrasted but complementary. The individual can only attain his full development in society, and that society is the best which is made up of the most fully developed and responsible individuals.

All through the history of Israel runs the theme of the faithful remnant and the faithless majority. The conquest of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria in 722 B.C. left Judah the sole heir of the promises. After the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586, the Jews who did not accept the prophetic teaching simply became absorbed in the surrounding nations, as did the other peoples conquered by the Chaldeans. It was only the faithful remnant who accepted the prophetic teaching who returned from exile or formed the Judaism of the dispersion. In the restored community there was no monarchy; but the priesthood represented institutional continuity. Temple and sacrifices were restored, but without the old abuses. Animal sacrifice is an ugly thing, and the temple must often have looked and smelt like a butcher's shop. The teaching of the Gita seems much more spiritual:

'If any earnest soul make offering to me with devotion of leaf or flower or fruit or water, that offering of devotion I enjoy' (9:26).

It is easy to find a parallel to this in the New Testament, but it is not the whole truth about sacrifice. It leaves out the sense of sin that lay behind the offerings of 'goats and calves and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean' which made animal sacrifice, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews shows, an essential part of the preparation for the offering of the 'one full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice'—the life of Jesus Christ.

Our Lord came in the first place preaching the kingdom of God, a kingdom of which He was Himself the king. Once more we have the theme of the people of God. The twelve apostles clearly understood themselves to be chosen for office in that kingdom, and our Lord did not contradict them; they were to sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19: 28). It was about the nature of the expected kingdom and of authority in it that they were mistaken, so mistaken that in Gethsemane they all forsook Him and fled, and on Good Friday the faithful remnant of the true Israel had been reduced to one Man—and He was dead. With the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost all was changed. Those who identified themselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in His baptism formed the new Israel, the Christian Church (Acts 2: 38; Romans 6: 3-11; 1 Peter 3: 18-22). But the Christian Church never appears as a formless and unorganized body, though we have not enough evidence in the New Testament to enable us to describe exactly the details of its organization. It is clear that from the beginning the apostles and elders—including the Lord's brothers—presided over the Church in Jerusalem. Apostles—who apparently included a wider circle than the Twelve, even with the addition of St. Paul—travelled about from Church to Church and claimed authority over the Churches which they founded (1 Corinthians 9: 1; 2 Corinthians 12: 12). Each of these Churches, so far as our evidence goes, was presided over by a council of presbyter-bishops whose office was probably copied from that of the elders of the Jewish synagogue. St. Paul three times uses the metaphor of the body to express the order and organization of the Church (Romans 12: 4 and 5; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-30; Ephesians 4: 11-16). Among the first generation of Christians, the expectation of an immediate second coming of Christ was too vivid for there to be much thought of succession in office; but the conception appears very clearly in the epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, written probably about A.D. 96. By the middle of the second century if not earlier, each Church has its bishop presiding over a council of presbyters who, with the deacons, are ordained by him. He himself is consecrated by the laying on of hands of neighbouring bishops and claims to have succeeded, within his own Church, to the authority of the apostles; whilst the succession of bishops in certain important sees, especially those which could claim an apostle as founder, was carefully recorded and considered to ensure that the holders of these sees would be

speciāly reliable as upholders of sound doctrines—a matter which was particularly important in view of the challenge of gnostic beliefs at a time when the process of the formation of the canon of the New Testament was still incomplete. One of the most obscure questions in Church history is how the apostolic Church of the first century turned into the episcopal church of the second ; but, whatever the exact process, it is clear that it must have been a natural and almost imperceptible growth ; that it involved no conscious breach with the past and no particular controversy ; for, small as our knowledge of the second century Church is, it is still sufficient to make it incredible that, if there had been any serious controversy over the development of episcopacy, it should have left absolutely no trace in our records. From that time to the Reformation there was no break in the organic development of the Church. In course of time permanent schisms arose—the ‘separated’ Churches of the East, the Jacobites and Nestorians, and later the permanent schism between East and West, but each of these separated branches preserved its organic connection with the undivided Church through the episcopate. The office of bishop did not, of course, remain exactly the same through the centuries ; in fact it showed itself as protean as the English monarchy. First we have the second century bishop of a single congregation in a single city, normally presiding each Sunday at the Eucharist, though he might at need delegate one of the presbyters to act for him, and looking, with his council of presbyters, more like a Church of Scotland minister with his kirk session than like a modern diocesan bishop ; then, the worldly-minded, courtier-bishop of the Christian empire, who is growing into a diocesan in the modern sense, with the multiplication of Christian congregations, the celebration of whose Eucharists has to be permanently deputed to a presbyter, who thus becomes a parish priest ; the missionary bishop of the Dark Ages ; the feudal bishop, a great landowner, as much statesman as churchman. Some of these developments were no doubt perversions and led to the abuses which provoked the Reformation.

The Reformation in its effect on the continuity of the Christian Church may be compared to the political revolutions in England and France. Whatever irregularities may have occurred over the centuries, episcopacy can claim, as no other form of Church government can, to be an unbroken development from apostolic times ; and a Church like the Anglican, which took trouble to preserve this link at the Reformation, can still claim that continuity, though it is impossible to deny that great and revolutionary changes were made in the English Church at that time. They were similar in gravity to the seventeenth century revolutions in the English state, which also have not destroyed its continuity with the medieval kingdom of England. But the changes made in the Churches which rejected episcopacy were more comparable to those produced in France by the revolution. They did not mean that the non-episcopal reformed Churches

ceased to be part of the Church, any more than the French nation ceased to be the French nation ; but they did mean that in this case there had been a breach in the organic continuity between a part of the Church and its pre-Reformation past. This was partly caused by an extreme emphasis on individual religion which the rigid organization of the late medieval Church seemed to neglect. The whole Reformation has sometimes been somewhat inadequately summed up as the assertion of the right of private judgment—Luther's 'Here stand I, I can do no other'. There is enough truth in this to account for the predominance in Protestantism, particularly in German-speaking Protestantism, of a tradition of individual pietism which tends to neglect or minimize the importance of the Church.

Yet the point of contact between the individual man and the cosmic Christ is always the historic Church. This is true in the most extreme instances. Daniel Defoe, a Protestant Dissenter of the seventeenth century, makes Robinson Crusoe on his desert island, turn to his Bible after a bout of sickness and come to an experience of repentance and conversion through reading it, after a long career of carelessness and indifference. But in fact Robinson Crusoe did not come to a saving experience of Jesus Christ through the Bible alone without any help from the Church, any more than he made life comfortable for himself in his desert island by inventing for himself all the arts of civilization. He owed almost all that made his life on the island better than that of the surrounding savages to materials saved from the wreck, and to the knowledge and observation which came from his education and previous experience of life among civilized people. So it was with his Christianity. The Bible would not have existed at all if it had not been written by members of the Church ; it was the Church which had selected the writings which were to be included in it ; it was the value set upon the Bible by the Church and its use in worship which led to its being preserved, copied, handed down and translated into a language which Robinson Crusoe could understand. The captain's pious widow, who sent some Bibles to him with his other property, was presumably a member of some Puritan congregation in England. Crusoe himself had been, as he says, 'well instructed by father and mother'; and it is obvious that what he expected to find in the Bible and how he interpreted what he read there, had been deeply affected by memories of that early instruction. Our point of encounter with the cosmic Christ always comes to us through the visible, historic Church ; and there is something lacking if it does not result in active membership within it.

A Christian is one who is 'in Christ'; and the outward and visible sign of his condition is his sacramental incorporation into the Church which is Christ's body. This incorporation is, in the first place, effected by baptism. We find no unbaptized Christians in the New Testament. We must be born again 'by water and the Spirit' (John 3:5). Baptism stands for a death to sin and a

resurrection to new life in Christ (Romans 6:3-11; Colossians 3:3). Outside the Church there is no salvation because salvation in Christ is precisely life in the Christian fellowship—in the visible Church on earth which is the earnest of our inheritance and afterwards in the fuller fellowship of the communion of saints. So, after baptism, our sacramental union with Christ is continued by the constantly repeated experience of partaking in the Eucharist—the messianic banquet, the nourishment of our spiritual life, the outward and visible sign of our fellowship in Christ. The Eucharist is both the point of our closest and most intimate contact with Christ, and the thing which we can least of all do for ourselves in isolation. It is for this reason that the celebrant of the Eucharist must have a representative character. This is something that no man can take it upon himself to do. This, and not any kind of priestcraft coming between the individual soul and God, is the reason why all episcopal Churches reserve the celebration of the Eucharist to bishops and the presbyters ordained by them. This is the outward and visible sign of the historic continuity of the Church, the link which binds the celebration of the Eucharist in a modern Indian Church, or perhaps in no church at all, in the open air in a village, with all the Eucharists which have ever been celebrated throughout the ages, back to that upper room in Jerusalem where our Lord said, ‘Do this in remembrance of Me’. God’s grace will be given wherever any of his Church meet together with a sincere intention of obeying His commandment; but the outward and visible sign of continuity provided by the orders of the minister adds a new dimension to the sacrament. It makes us free of the whole historic past of the Church. It reminds a particular congregation in a particular place and time that they are no mere fortuitous collection of Christians but are organically incorporated into the Body of Christ.

Christianity is essentially sacramental. It has been described as the most material of all the great religions, for in it neither matter nor worldly existence are the source of evil. God created the world and made it good, and when the fullness of time was come, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Matter therefore becomes the vehicle of spiritual truth; and indeed we can come by it in no other way. The new life of the Spirit at Pentecost had to be embodied in the life of the visible Church with its institutions and its organized organic life. Of this institution it is possible to write a history with little or no reference to the basis of its existence. Nor has that history always been creditable. At times the principle of the faithful remnant has reasserted itself, as it did in the old Israel before the incarnation. Yet in spite of all its weaknesses, the presence of the Church in the world is a sacramental presence. It is the outward and visible sign of the presence of Christ in the world, and its organic continuity with the Church in the past, though it is not the only form which continuity can take, unites us in a

visible community with prophets and apostles and saints. Through the Church and in no other way can we attain the all-important contact with the cosmic Christ which is the centre of Brunner's theology; and it is only through the connection maintained by the continuity of its history between the Church and its Founder that we can understand the essential identity of the man Jesus of Nazareth and the cosmic Christ.

★

Doing what we ought not to do or not doing what we ought to do is the bane of our whole human history. The very fact that we have the idea of the 'ought' in us shows that there is already the working of the Divine in us. To convert the 'ought' into the 'is' needs more than human power. When we become conscious of this there is ready at hand the infinite resources of the Divine energy surging all round. A clear consciousness of the moral situation together with the determined effort to be on the side of the good, will open the flood gates of Divine energy into our lives. It is at this point that we could say with St. Paul, 'It is no longer I that liveth but Christ that liveth in me.' This is the kernel of truth in the Upanisadic phrase Tat tvam asi.

★

The Vedānta gives us the immanence of God in the soul, the Sāṅkhya emphasizes the individuality and inalienability of the self, Yoga teaches the way of self-realization through self-control, Mimāṃsā lays down the idea of salvation through disinterested work and the Nvāva and Vaiśeṣika emphasize the need of clear thinking to come to right conclusions. These, taken generally, are valuable elements which cannot be ignored in systematic theistic thinking. If we can only incorporate all these valuable elements with the central significance given to morality, we will find ourselves moving towards a Theism that will be able to appreciate the need for thinking of God as suffering in a moral universe for the regeneration of souls.