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Editorials

IS SYNCRETISM THE ANSWER?

MUCH is heard today of the decline of religion in the world's life and of the spread of secular and materialistic attitudes. What can be done to arrest this trend? There is one answer that has for many people a fascination: let the several religions join forces in their spiritual witness, or let them give way to a new religion, a composite of what is best in them all. The day is past for hoping that humanity can become religiously unified through some one religion becoming universal. Why not seek this unity through the essential truth in all the great religions?

The Baha'i movement, of Persian origin but with groups of adherents in the United States and Canada, heralds this approach to unity, being persuaded that fundamental beliefs are the same in all religious faiths. Of greater significance are Toynbee's thoughts on the future of religion, in his great work, *A Study of History*, vol. VII. For him, neither Christianity nor any other higher religion is "an exclusive and definitive revelation of spiritual truth". It is error or blasphemy to deny that "other religions may be God's chosen and sufficient channels for revealing Himself to some human souls". "Human nature is stamped with the fruitful diversity that is a hall-mark of God's creative work"; the diversity of the higher religions becomes in the light of this "a necessary corollary of the diversity of the Human Psyche". Hence the era of conflict between the religions should give place to mutual acknowledgment that each religion genuinely satisfies some widely experienced human need. The other course, to claim for one's own religion a monopoly of the Divine Light or that it holds all the Truth necessary for man's final good, is the way of *hybris*. How much more consonant to Christianity's own spirit to own the values in other faiths and rejoice in them! Or in our own form of the problem: in face of the world challenge of materialism will not more be gained by the co-operative temper and effort than by one religion standing off from the others in the belief that it alone possesses what man's spirit ultimately craves?

These questions, we say, many find enticing; but behind them are assumptions that involve deep issues, even issues of fact. Is it true that the teaching of the great religions is basically one; or in Toynbee's phrase again, that the rival forms of worship are "alternative approaches to the One True God along avenues offering divers partial glimpses of an identical Beatific Vision"? Or is what Christianity brings to men proper to itself and irreplaceable? This is a matter on which just now most Christians are far from clear.

Dr. E. R. Fairweather writes (Fairweather and Hettlinger, *Episcopacy and Reunion*, p. 1): "The Christian religion is founded on a divine act in history—the total act of redemption and self-revelation which God

decisively performed in Jesus Christ—and it must always be dependent on the unique event of the Gospel.” Here there is no question of “alternative approaches”; as the same writer adds: “the once-for-all act of God to which the Gospel testifies, is the one genuine basis of religious life in every age.” This, of course, does not preclude joint insistence with other religions on ethical and spiritual values against the current secular aggression; nor does it debar co-operation between Christians, Jews and others over wide areas of community good. But it retains along with this Christianity’s *real* mission which it cannot yield to another: the proclamation of God’s way for man in Jesus Christ. Any *rapprochement* between Christianity and other faiths is from the basis of this peculiar charge laid upon Christianity, and has its measure in Christianity’s obligation to offer to men of all faiths its singular divine Word.

This is the position if the Christian Gospel, God’s grace in Jesus Christ, is His one sufficient provision for man’s spiritual need, and God decrees that all men have knowledge of it. The stress here in conceiving Christianity is on God’s purpose of reconciliation and the Church’s redemptive mission. The alternative case occurs if we begin by finding Christianity’s chief meaning in its ethical teaching. Then the separateness of Christianity is not so apparent. Is the Christian ethical wisdom purer than this from the Indian Vishnu-Krishna: “He who is unconcerned about the things of the world, free from attachment to earthly things, without hate to any being—he is dear to me”? Or than this from Buddhism: “Let us cultivate love without measure toward all beings. Let us cultivate towards the whole world a heart of love unstinted, unmixed with the sense of differing interests. This state of heart is the best in the world”? The terms of this are as universal as anything in Christianity; seemingly the wall of partition between the religions vanishes if ethical doctrine is made the touchstone. The same is true if we add belief in God, for this too in noble forms is the ground and pillar of several of the religions. It is God in Christ that is of Christianity only, and gives it its message that is not found elsewhere.

This is the issue—that of Christianity’s true and essential character—about which Christians today need new clarity and understanding. Is Christianity *the* way, or one of many ways; one of many visions of man’s appointed goal? If the latter, then syncretism or synthesis may be the key: reciprocal giving and receiving, Christians learning from Hinduism, Hindus from Christianity, both of these from Islam and the other faiths which also are enriched from them. But if the other is the truth, if the advent of Christ to the world and what God wrought in Him are decisive and all-encompassing, then syncretism offers nothing. There is no reciprocity at the place where Christianity manifests Christ Crucified and Risen; no synthesis of the Cross and Resurrection with something else—no extension of them—to make them complete or enhance their efficacy. Christians can work with non-Christians of all types, in service enterprises in community living, for peace and social betterment, for common equity in international affairs.

But if Christianity is God's call and sovereign visitation for man's return to Himself, if in this call to return to Him God has embraced all peoples, then Christians must so testify in no faltering strain. That Christianity is for the world does not hang upon the text, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel", but on the actual content of Christianity, the intrinsic nature of Christ's Person and Work as affecting all men and absolutely valid. Nor need it nurture pride, as Toynbee fears, for Christians to claim primacy for their faith, if there the truth lies; but rather humility in having such truth to declare, which yet is not of oneself. So we welcome the sign of better relations among the world's religions, in place of rivalry and animosity; yet it can make indirection and confusion the greater if Christians meet this sign with something less than Christianity's full meaning or than the sure knowledge of how far for them its ancient imperative still stands.

THEOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP

AS our first editorial on "The Purpose of the Journal" indicated, this periodical is not a journal of scholarly research, even though some of its contents may well illuminate the problems of various fields of technical scholarship. Its aim—in some respects more modest, in others more daring—is to discuss those issues of Christian faith and practice which bear directly on the life of the Church and on the thinking and action of the Christian believer, and to do this against the background of the past history and the present circumstances of the Christian communions of Canada. It is, in other words, essentially a journal of *theology*, devoted to the expression of Christian truth and to the clarification of the way of life which that truth involves. It is intended to help both priests and ministers and laymen to a deeper understanding of their faith and of their responsibility as believers in the very diverse circumstances of their lives, rather than to promote theological scholarship in the strict sense.

At the same time, we intend no divorce between theology and scholarship. While elaborate technical discussions and scholarly apparatus will not be found in our columns, we are prepared to publish only material which, in the judgment of expert readers, has solid scholarly foundations. This standard is required by the very nature of theology, which rests on a primary revelation and lives amidst a developing tradition, both of which must be interpreted in the light of the most precise methods of historical research.

As editors of a theological journal, therefore, we must be vitally concerned with the status of theological scholarship in Canada. It is fair to say summarily that in the past theological scholarship has played a small role in the life of Canadian churches. For practical reasons, which were fully discussed in our first number, Canada provides few opportunities for intensive scholarly work. Only two centres—Toronto and Montreal—can begin to offer the essential facilities for advanced study in most theological disciplines, whether one is looking for substantial libraries or for teaching staffs with

diversified training and at least some leisure for research. Furthermore, our theological schools do not have the resources from which to provide adequate scholarship funds, fellowships or tutorial appointments, for the support of graduate study. Thus many of our parochial clergy are deprived of the extra intellectual stimulus that would be of the greatest value to them in their ministry, while enough adequately trained Canadians simply cannot be found to fill responsible teaching posts in our colleges. Valuable as the interchange of men and ideas is, and great as the contribution of teachers from across the Atlantic has been, it is scandalous that Canada has for so long been content simply to receive, without playing its own part in the preparation of scholars for the Church.

It may, of course, be said—and truly—that the fine scholar is not necessarily a good teacher, but it is wishful thinking and bad logic to conclude from this that the poor scholar will be a good teacher. Whatever else is required of those who are to make their special contribution to the Church in the area of theological teaching and leadership, there is no substitute for scholarly discipline in their preparation. If, however, the churches of Canada are to be adequately supplied with scholars, they and the institutions of learning which serve them must face a twofold challenge.

In the first place, our seminaries need not only more funds for library and faculty, but also more systematic use of their existing facilities. For example, at our largest English-speaking centre, the nucleus at least of a graduate school exists, in the Toronto Graduate School of Theological Studies, while the various college libraries, added to those of the University of Toronto and of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, provide adequate material for the most advanced students in several fields. A fuller graduate program, however, approaching the standard of the finest institutions of this continent, still needs to be worked out, and a closer integration of libraries is essential, if scholarly periodicals are to be made available for research students and duplications of expensive purchases are to be avoided. We need, that is, to be sure that our existing equipment at various centres across the country is as good and as effectively used as possible.

Secondly, young potential scholars must be assisted to undertake advanced studies in Canada and elsewhere. Provision should be made at each theological college for scholarships for study and travel outside Canada, and at least at the more important centres for tutorial posts in which promising young Canadians and others may gain teaching experience, pursue their own studies, and contribute to the thinking of their senior colleagues as well as of their pupils.

All this may seem visionary in the extreme—not to say extravagant. And yet, if Canadian churches are to be sound in themselves, and to make their due contribution to Christendom as a whole, one essential condition is the raising of our scholarly standards. Without sound scholarship the whole structure of our teaching and preaching is built on sand.