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The Christian Message and Non-Christian Religions

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(Part of a paper read at a B.D. College Teachers' Conference held at Bangalore in September 1957.)

The determination of the relationship between the Gospel and other religions is a complex problem. The Christian message sometimes assumes the form of judgement, and at other times is given as a message of fulfilment; sometimes it is proclaimed as a better and more excellent way. The New Testament furnishes us with examples of all of these. Thus in Acts 14:15-17 the Christian message is given in the form of a mild warning: 'Ye should turn from these vain things unto the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that in them is.' The concept of fulfilment seems to have been employed in Acts 17:23 where St. Paul says to the Athenians: 'What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this set I forth unto you.' In the Epistle to the Hebrews (1:1) the Gospel is stated as something better and final: 'God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son.' Both the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle to the Ephesians refer to the work of Christ as a new and living way to God (Ephesians 2:13).

Thus the quest for God, whether it is the Upanishadic search for Reality, or through the sadhanas of later Hinduism, or the eightfold path of Buddhism, may form a relevant background for the message of the Gospel. At one time the missionary evangelist was critical of the other religions. In our time we are learning afresh how to present the Christian message to our contemporaries in the Asian lands. As we become aware of our obligation to bear witness to Christ we are faced with the problem of the right theological approach: 'In what relationship does the message of the Cross stand to the religious environment?' Ultimately our problem is one of communication.

One method of communicating the Gospel is through a thorough grasp on the one hand of the nature of the love of God as manifested to mankind in Jesus Christ, and a sympathetic understanding of the religious environment of the Indian people on the other. The Bible presents us with the living God whose

character is self-giving or love at its best. Whether in creating or in caring for the world, God is the Saving God. Man on the other hand, due to his finitude and freedom, manifests a puzzling response to the self-giving activity of God. He longs to belong to God and at the same time aspires to be independent of Him. The religions of the world are systematized expressions of this dialectic response of man to God. They belong to the sphere of God-relatedness and at the same time constitute the adversaries of God. They recognize the sovereignty of God yet tend to resist it because it seems to interfere with their pride and pretensions. The best example of this attitude is furnished by Judaism which resisted the Messiah. Against these pretensions the wrath of God is revealed, but it is always a saving wrath. Hence all religions are exposed to the judgement and the saving mercy of God. The message of the Gospel to everyone of them is 'Repent and believe'.

But the attitude of the Christian Gospel towards other religions cannot be expressed by means of any one single category such as fulfilment or judgement. Dr. Kraemer in his latest book has modified his original standpoint on this subject and said that positive religions are a 'yes' and a 'no' to the revelation of God. Though this dialectical mode of thinking is not familiar to us Orientals it seems to express the complex nature of the relation of the Gospel to the other faiths.

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

In one respect the other religions may be viewed as forerunners of the Gospel. The Fathers of the Church found both continuity and discontinuity between Christianity and other religions. Irenaeus sees no other plan in the universe but the plan of God to sum up all things in Christ. Man is constantly being trained from the stage of the Decalogue to the Gospel. The law is a schoolmaster to Christ; the law trained mankind till it was able to bear the full divine revelation in Jesus Christ. Hence it is said that Christ came in the fullness of time. The Fathers interpret the fullness of time to mean that there was a continuity of people ready to receive the Messiah. The Blessed Virgin Mary's acceptance of the call to become the mother of the Messiah is therefore understood as an act performed in a representative capacity. Representing those who were waiting for the consolation of Israel the Blessed Virgin said: 'Be it unto me according to thy word'. Viewed thus there is a continuity between Judaism and the Gospel. But there was a break in the continuity between the time that Christ was announced and the time when He actually appeared on the plane of history. Irenaeus explains this discontinuity by referring to John the Baptist the forerunner of Christ. He says: 'When a king is coming he sends envoys. But when he actually arrives we see the difference between him and his envoys. There is no longer any need of forerunners. They

have to disappear in order that he may appear in all his glory.' It is in some such sense that the Fathers held views both of continuity and discontinuity between the Gospel and pagan religions. According to them the evidence of God's revealing activity in other religions is seen in the operation of the *logos spermatikos*.

The determination of the relationship between the Gospel and other religions is a complex problem. Our understanding of the relationship should primarily be based on the character and purpose of God as revealed in the Bible—and in particular in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is eternally longing to impart Himself to His creatures; He pursues this purpose without haste and without rest till it is accomplished. Nothing will deter Him from His immutable will to our blessedness except the unwillingness of man to have God in his mind. But God continues to reveal Himself now as wrath over all unrighteousness and now as supreme charity in its effort to rescue man. His self-disclosure in the Bible casts a searchlight on the religious systems of mankind, which men have erected in their effort to want God and at the same time to escape from Him. The religions of mankind then may be regarded as systems containing genuine elements of search for God and specimens of defensive mechanism against the claims of the living God. Ultimately it is only a thorough grasp of the nature of the Gospel which will provide us with a critique of other religions.

It is difficult to deny that most other religions manifest certain facets of a genuine search for God. Yet when the Saviour comes into their midst calling them home they resist His claims. The Messiah comes to seek and to save; but as He rescues men from the thralldom of the powers which hold them in bondage a conflict ensues. This is the Messianic conflict, a conflict which figures prominently in the Synoptic narrative. The same conflict is reproduced in the experience of the non-Christian in his decision for Christ. The claims of Christ come into conflict with the pretensions of pride, prestige, caste and worldly position. The act of conversion involves a clear break with the former pagan life—a discontinuity between paganism and the Gospel.

FULFILMENT AND CONFLICT

It is not easy to reconcile the idea of fulfilment with that of conflict or judgement. On the one hand we have the saying of our Lord: 'I have not come to destroy but to fulfil' (Matthew 5:17). The Bhakti writings contain many foregleams of God of which the Incarnate Life of our Lord is the crown and fulfilment. On the other hand our Lord says: 'Every plant which my Father hath not planted shall be rooted up' (Matthew 15:13), suggesting a judgement on many aspects of positive religions. Generally speaking religions apart from the Gospel stand as monuments of man's effort to get re-united to God on his (man's) own terms

and by his own efforts. Pre-eminently Buddhism and Jainism are such efforts at salvation by self-effort. They manifest a bewildering confusion of God's word and man's ingenuity.

The Christian apologist in India has to work with the concepts both of fulfilment and of conflict, resisting the temptation to oversimplify the problem as Farquhar and Kraemer have tended to do at times. Some light is thrown upon our problem by a closer study of the Old Testament idea of the Covenant. God's promise to Abraham was threefold: to give him the promised land, to bless all nations in him, and that of his race the Saviour should be born. But prior to His covenant with Abraham God made the covenant with Noah, not to upset the natural order of things; and the rainbow is the sign of the covenant. Here we should note that what joins us to God is a unilateral promise and not a bilateral contract as the Pharisees had thought. God's promise is not at the mercy of our unfaithfulness. Nonetheless it is true that we can put ourselves out of the reach of the promises of God. The continued infidelity of the Jews is a case in point. But Christian optimism, that is a Christian faith in the city of God, is founded upon God's promises, and on God's immutable will to our blessedness. The city of God is gradually being built up because God is faithful to His promises. Thus emerges the Church, the new Israel which is the token of the continued faithfulness of God to His covenant. Viewed thus the relationship between Christianity and the other faiths is one of succession. God has been as it were seeking for entrance into the stream of history. It seemed as if He succeeded when Zarathustra uttered his Gathas, or Gautama taught the Dharma, or when the songs of the suffering servant were articulated. Fulfilling the values in all these events God's faithfulness to the covenant found its highest expression when He came down and dwelt with us in Jesus Christ. In the order of continuity Christianity represents the highest point of evolution.

But there would have been no problem for the Christian apologist if the positive religions had allowed themselves to be superseded. They actually present rival claims to the Gospel; therefore conflict between them and Christianity seems inevitable. Judaism is a very good example of this refusal to be superseded by the Gospel. The non-Christian faiths refuse to accept the new life offered in Christianity and thus face conflict. It is in such a situation that the concept of judgement has to be employed in Christian apology.

Yet we cannot afford to lose sight of the concept of fulfilment. Once again it is useful to go back to the covenant of God with Abraham. The migration of Abraham is an epoch-making event in history. Abraham is an example of conversion to the living God in the total act of faith. His call was to leave his home and his kindred and thus to make a clean break with his past life (Hebrews 6:13-24). The object of the covenant was the salvation of mankind: 'All nations shall be blessed in thee.' The

coming of God's kingdom was set before him as it were in three stages: first the emergence of Israel as the people of God, second the coming of the Messiah, and third the Church as the new Israel. These three epochs of history sum up the object of Abraham's faith: for he is called to be the father of a mighty nation, through one of his descendants God's blessing would spread over all the world; and all nations of the world would be saved in Him. Among the pagans of the world Abraham stands like a solitary figure, firmly believing that the nations of the world would be saved. This is the peak of Abraham's faith. The Christian evangelist must stand by the side of Abraham and believe with all his heart that the Indian people will one day believe in our Lord Jesus Christ. You may say that there is very little to warrant such a hope in the present situation; but then there was much less to warrant the faith of Abraham! The salvation of the world is still the object of faith and hope. That all things should be summed up in Christ, that the kingdoms of the world would become the kingdom of Christ—this is the faith of Abraham; that is the day which Abraham saw and rejoiced (John 8:56). Thus Abraham inaugurated a great missionary contemplation.

The promise made to Abraham was not going to become invalid through the infidelity of Israel. Because Israel proved unfaithful God was not going to take back His promise. The history of Israel is the history of the continued faithfulness of God to His covenant despite the infidelity of Israel. This history of Israel prefigures the relationship between mankind and Christ. The faithfulness of God wears out the infidelity and intransigence of man. This is the mystery of God's patience which transcends our unbelief and self-will. Examples of this we can see in the conception of Sarah contrary to human hope and expectation, or better still the conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary who brought forth the Saviour without human agency, or the readiness of Abraham to offer Isaac the son of promise, a prototype of God giving His eternal Son for the salvation of a rebellious world, or the self-giving of our Lord to the Church however unworthy she may be.

Continuing the story of Abraham we read in Genesis 14: 18-19 that Melchisedek brought bread and wine to Abraham and blessed him. He appears as a priest-king of ancient Canaan, welcoming Abraham, the bearer of the covenant. What was the religion of Canaan before the arrival of Abraham? It was the nature religion of mankind, and Melchisedek appears as the priest faithful to the covenant of Noah. He came to give Abraham the greeting of primitive religion. He is the priest of the God who created heaven and earth; his sacrifice was the sacrifice of all mankind, for man is the high priest of all creation.

The meeting of Melchisedek with Abraham is of great significance. Abraham seemed as if he was inaugurating a new order of things. The representatives of primitive natural religion could

have reacted in a hostile way ; they could have clung to their old religion (which is of God) and refused to take any notice of this man Abraham chosen by God to set up a new religion. That is what positive religions do to the Gospel today, and that is what Judaism did to the Messiah two thousand years ago. But that is not the way a forerunner reacts. When the one for whom he has prepared the way arrives he must give way. But the temptation is to cling to the old. Buddha was one of Christ's great fore-runners and yet will probably be the last adversary to accept His claims. He prepared the way for Christ in India ; it is even said that the Hindu idea of *avatara* arose after seeing his beautiful life. Buddha was the best representative of natural religion. But today Buddhism is an opponent of Christianity.

The Epistle to the Hebrews says that Christ's priesthood was after the order of Melchisedek. Our Lord showed continuity with the covenant made with Noah whose high priest was Melchisedek. Thus Christ was carrying into reality what was prefigured in the Old Testament. All the efforts ever made to worship God and enter into the communion with Him were completed and perfected in Christ's sacrifice.

We see this clearly in the sacramentalism of Christianity. Sacramentalism is in fact the point at which Christianity is most deeply bound up with the natural religions of the world. There seem to be all sorts of mysterious ways in which men belong to Christ and are saved, and yet it is necessary that all men should own the sovereignty of Christ. The problem is to be considered on a sacramental plane. Take for instance the sacrament of baptism. In one form or the other this is a widespread religious rite. The Jews practised it. Baptism was practised in the sea before a person was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries. First came the purifying rite, then the initiation, and finally the imparting of the secret doctrine ; this is the order of initiation in many religions. Think of the ardent desire for ritual bathing in the Ganges and other sacred rivers. Might we not hope that the waters of the Ganges might be laden with grace so that those who bathe in it might derive not only external purification but also a new birth ? Is there not in this bathing in the Ganges a sort of anticipation of what one day may be the baptizing of the religions of India ? Consider the sacred meal signifying communion with God ; the feasting on the sacrificed animal at the Kali Temple. In every religion there is an obscure intuition that material things convey inward spiritual grace and through them we come to God. This universal sacramentalism is a kind of fore-shadowing of the way in which Christianity carries the precious values of other religions further, without destroying them. On this sacramental plane positive religions are a prefiguring and a preparation for Christ.

It will be clear from what we have said that no one single category such as fulfilment or judgement, continuity or discontinuity, can in any way adequately express the relationship

between the Christian faith and non-Christian religions. Sometimes we have to use one category, sometimes we have to use the other ; such difficulties are inevitable if we remember that all religions contain both aspirations for God and resistance to His beneficent working and power.

★

No Refreshing except in Thee

*Round Thy lotus feet, O let my love be wrapt ; and it matters
naught where my body lie,
In city residence or forest hermitage, in rags of poverty, robes
of wealth :
Teach me but to be faithful unto Thee.
Like the serpent of his gem deprived, so am I in agony with-
out a vision of Thee, O Lord.
Let me not by praise or blame be moved : within the depths
of my soul let me enshrine Thee :
And Thou wilt hold me dear, my Lord.*

Tulsidas

★

We should go to God

*What messenger need go to the ants' house ? At the sight of
sugar they come running to it.
Does the giver stand waiting when no beggar is near ?
It is the beggar who runs to better himself.
Do food and water say, ' Come, eat us up !'
It is the hungry man who goes in quest of them.
The patient runs to the physician to get rid of his sufferings.
One who means to better himself, says Tuka, he listens to
God's praises, he cultivates a pleasure in this.*

Tukaram