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

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# Review Articles

## EASTERN CHRISTIANITY TODAY

S. ESTBORN

The author of this little book<sup>1</sup> is well-known in India since his stay in Travancore in 1953-1954, when he, invited by the Orthodox Syrian Church, worked as the Principal of the Catholicate College at Pathanamthitta. Being a son of the Orthodox Church in Russia and working as a Professor at the University of Oxford, he has felt it his special calling and taste to make the Western Churches more familiar with the Oriental forms of the Christian Church. He has done so in a number of most interesting and instructive books, like *The Church of the Eastern Christians* (1942), *Three Russian Prophets* (1944), *The Russians and their Church* (1945). His aim in writing these books is not mere information. He wants to serve the great cause of the unification of Christendom. The urgency of this task is made evident in several of his latest books, the best-known of which is *The Reintegration of the Church* (1952).

In the above book his expressed aim is to make the Eastern Tradition of Christianity known to Indian circles, Hindu as well as Christian. It is, therefore, written particularly with Indian conditions and problems in view. The title of the book is not quite adequate, because the Christian East includes more than the so-called Orthodox Churches, i.e. the block of the Byzantine Churches, and the so-called Schismatic Churches of the Middle East and Malabar in India, which the book describes. To the Christian East belongs now also a large part of Roman Catholic as well as Protestant Christendom. A title more true to the content of the book would have been *The Christian Churches of the Eastern Tradition*.

His many years' stay in the West and of intimate contact with Western Christianity enabled the author to compare and contrast the Western tradition with that of his own Church. His fine analyses of the two traditions and their differences in emphases and viewpoints are most instructive and illuminating. Sometimes, however, the reader may doubt whether his contrasts are quite correct. When, time and again, he points out that Western

<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Zernov: *The Christian East*. S.P.C.K. 1956. Price: Rs.1/75.

Christianity, contrary to the Eastern, makes a sharp distinction between matter and spirit (p. 47), it is true only in so far as this distinction is made more sharp in Western than in Hebrew thought and faith. But this distinction the West has learnt from the East. Further, the author says that the West conceives of redemption itself as man's liberation from earthly bondage, whereas in the East spirit and matter are conceived as two manifestations of the same reality, both of which are to be sanctified and made the temple of the indwelling God (p. 36). To this it must be said that both statements seem to be in need of considerable revision. Western Christianity conceives of redemption as salvation from sin and evil, not as liberation from earthly bondage in the sense of the material world. If at times there has been a tendency to identify matter and evil and to seek salvation through the suppression of the body, this is something which the West has got from the East. Is it possible to forget all the excesses of asceticism and the tormenting of the body, inside and outside the Church, which from the East invaded the West in the fourth and fifth centuries ?

On the question of the Eastern conception of Salvation, however, we must be a little more explicit. Here we touch the heart and centre of the Christian faith, and differences here are decisive. They will reveal themselves in all aspects of the life of the Church. The author has studied the two traditions in all these aspects and makes many striking observations with regard to the significance of their differences. To the author it is visible already in the architecture of church buildings. The flame-shaped cupolas of the Russian churches, with their bright, arresting colours, proclaim the regenerating power given to the Christian community, whereas the austere architecture of Western churches symbolizes the conflict between two hostile realms. The interior decorations of Eastern and Western churches also express these two interpretations of Christianity. The orthodox temples represent Heaven and Earth joined together in an indissoluble union. The sanctuary, separated from the rest of the building by a screen, is heaven with its holiness and mystery. The interior of Western churches, with their pews, pulpits and altars corresponds with the teaching that man must be continuously assisted from above in order to make progress along the right path. The behaviour of the worshippers in the two churches is also very different. In a Western church it is strictly punctual and uniform. All follow the lead of the officiating clergy, and stand, kneel or sit at the same time and together. In an Eastern church the priest is seen only occasionally ; during many parts of the service he remains behind the screen. The service is not conducted by him ; it is a corporate action. But no uniformity is necessary. Some kneel, others prostrate, others prefer to stand. Some come in late, others go out before the end of the service. This freedom, in the opinion of the author, expresses the idea of the Church as a great family, in the treasures of which each and every member has an

equal share. He knows that whether he stays only a few minutes at the service, or spends several hours there, he is participating only very inadequately in the never-ceasing glorious worship of the whole church of Christ.

Most striking is the difference in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. In spite of different interpretations, both Roman and Protestant rites agree in this that the culminating point of the action is the Divine intervention, bringing to men the means of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation with their Heavenly Father through the supreme sacrifice of His Son. For an Orthodox Christian, on the other hand, the Eucharist is not so much an intervention from above, as the gradual revelation of the Divine Presence, and spirit and matter join together, and time stops its flow as it merges with the ocean of Eternal life and light.

All this is symbolized in the three-staged dramatic action of the Eucharist, as *Prothesis*, or Preparation of the Gifts, the *Synaxis*, or Assembly, known usually under the names of the 'Liturgy of the Catechumens' and as *Anaphora* or Offering of the Gifts, known as the 'Liturgy of the Faithful'. The author points out that the setting of this divine drama is paralleled in ancient Greek tragedy.

It is evident that the differences in tradition have their root in a different understanding of Christianity itself. According to Dr. Zernov the whole edifice of Christianity, in the teaching of the Orthodox Church, rests on the two cardinal truths, viz. the mystery of The Holy Trinity, and the mystery of the Incarnation (p. 72).

It immediately strikes a Western reader that the mystery of the Atonement is absent in this definition of the Christian faith. The author is fully aware that this means a different understanding of Salvation. 'Christ crucified, Christ dying on the Cross is the usual picture seen by Westerners' (p. 74). In the East, Salvation is the grant of a new life, the life of unity, holiness and immortality, bestowed upon redeemed mankind through Christ's victory over death and through the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. 'For the East, Christ is the Saviour because he showed the way of new life and proved by his Resurrection the power and truth of his teaching.'

The present reviewer cannot help asking the same question as he did five years ago after Dr. Zernov's lectures at Gurukul on the Sacraments of the Eastern churches. If this is the meaning of the Holy Eucharist, and thereby of the Christian message, what then about the curse of sin and evil under which the individual as well as the whole world is suffering and struggling in vain? Dr. Zernov admits in this book (p. 46) that the Eastern Service suffers from several serious defects. For instance, it does not stress enough the moral responsibility of the individual and makes an insufficient appeal to the will of each Christian. 'The services are apt to carry the worshippers away into the realm of timeless joy and freedom, instead of disciplining them and teaching them

methodically to apply Christian precepts.' But evidently he does not consider these things as too serious defects. For 'the East does not think about salvation in terms of the individual soul returning to its maker; it is visualized rather as a gradual process of transfiguration of the whole cosmos, culminating in *theosis* or the deification in Christ of the members of the Church as representatives and spokesmen of the entire creation' (p. 74).

If this is the teaching of Eastern Christianity today, naturally we must ask whether this is the Christianity of the Gospel. We saw above that the Atonement has no place in Dr. Zernov's theology. 'Christ is the Saviour because he showed the way to the new life.' St. Ignatius of Antioch, who was martyred about A.D. 112 and who had stood near the Apostles, wrote (in his letter in the Philadelphians) that 'the Gospel has something pre-eminent, indeed, viz. the coming of the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, His Suffering, and the Resurrection'. In the Incarnation, the Suffering and the Resurrection of our Lord, St. Ignatius found the 'pre-eminence' of the Gospel. Has Eastern Christianity in our time lost the Cross? When Dr. Zernov says: 'Christ crucified, Christ dying on the Cross, is the usual picture of the Saviour seen by Westerners', he cannot hope to escape the question: 'Only by Westerners? What about St. Paul and all the Apostles?' To ask the question is to answer it.

But Dr. Zernov is not very much troubled by this fact because the Bible is not the final authority. In contrast to Western Christianity, the Eastern church is not preoccupied with the problem of authority. Roman Catholics believe that final authority belongs to the Bishop of Rome; Protestants find it in the text of the Bible, but the Eastern church finds it in Tradition. What is Tradition? 'It is the Holy Spirit speaking and acting through the whole body of believers' (p. 75). With Luther we must ask: 'How do you know that it is the voice of the Holy Spirit you are hearing if you don't compare it and measure it against the Word of God?'

Dr. Zernov would answer: 'Each Christian hears the voice of the Spirit, but because the same voice speaks to other members of the same body only unanimous decisions reached in an atmosphere of humble obedience and perfect concord can be treated as expressing the divine will' (p. 76). All conditions taken seriously, this is a good answer. But immediately the question will be raised not only: why then neglect 'the picture seen by the Westerners', but the more serious one: how can the witness of the Apostles and the primitive Church as testified to in the New Testament be neglected?

Evidently the aim of the author in writing this book is the laudable one of making the Eastern form of Christianity better known to Indian people and his desire is that they should have access to the Gospel, not only through the sectarian channels of the West (p. 128), but also through the tradition of the Byzantine churches, which he thinks comes nearer to the heart of the East.

Probably this form of Christianity with its emphasis on Christ as Saviour in the sense that 'he has shown the way of a new life' and its sacramental mysticism of indwelling Grace, in which time stops its flow, as it merges with the ocean of Eternal life and light, will be more easily understood and accepted in India than the sterner aspects of the Gospel emphasized by the West. But the question must be seriously faced: Is this kind of Christianity the one that India needs?

Dr. Zernov's ideas of the reintegration of the Church and his zeal for Christian unity are well-known. In his view none of the four main groups of the divided Church—the Oriental (Monophysitic, Nestorian, and Thomas Christian), Byzantine ('Orthodox'), Roman, and Occidental (Protestant)—expresses the whole and full richness of the Christian faith. But each one of them has its own contribution to offer. 'Only if each of these interpretations is accepted as an integral part of the Christian community, can the true picture of the Catholic Church in all its inspiring variety, complexity and richness be properly grasped and its amazing structure fully understood' (p. 124). Very few among those who have any real sense for the problems of Christian unity would object to this view. It seems, however, that Dr. Zernov regards the Byzantine group as the cornerstone of the edifice, because, in his opinion, 'the Byzantine Christians have preserved better than any others the Apostolic form of Christian truth' (p. 126).

This, obviously, will have its bearing on the author's view of the situation in India. 'The Indian People stands at the cross-roads at present', he points out. 'Secularism and revived Hinduism, Christianity and Communism, seek to attract their attention. The country has been awakened to new life but it has not yet chosen the direction for its forward movement . . . Great is the responsibility of the Christian minority, great are its opportunities, but formidable are also the obstacles confronting it. The task of reconciliation, involving victory over the spirit of provincialism and sectarianism, is pressing its claim with the utmost urgency upon the members of the Indian churches' (p. 135). There is almost prophetic weight in these warnings and one wishes that they were taken to heart by every member of the Christian churches of India.

For good reasons Dr. Zernov holds the view that 'the emergence of an all-Indian church would be an event which might have a decisive influence upon the whole evaluation of contemporary Christianity' (p. 131). Again he finds the key to the problem in the 'Orthodox Church'. The so-called Syrian Orthodox Church in Kerala (the Catholicate party of the Syrian Christians), in his opinion, holds a key-post in the present divided state of Christendom, for they better than any other body can set in motion two movements of reconciliation of supreme importance for all Christians (p. 133). They are well placed for the establishment of sacramental fellowship between the Eastern and the

Protestant Christians, and between the Byzantine and the Oriental churches.

However eagerly one awaits the unity of all Christians, not only in India but in all the world, one may doubt whether the road Dr. Zernov has outlined is the way to the goal. There are many charming features in the picture Dr. Zernov has made of Eastern Christianity, and no-one would deny that the rest of Christendom has much to learn from it. But its many obvious defects, of which this article has pointed out some, exposes the thesis that these churches have preserved better than any others the apostolic form of Christian truth to serious doubts, yet a study of Dr. Zernov's fascinating book is highly rewarding.

## RELIGIONS

J. C. ARAPURA

The sub-title 'A Preliminary Historical and Theological Study' describes the aim and purposes of the book under review.<sup>1</sup> It does more; in fact it gives us, as the reading of the book will confirm, an insight into the method as well. It is customary for religions as well as religion to be studied historically so as to ensure the maximum of objectivity: historically means scientifically, assuming history to be a department of science. However the need for a theological study of the same universe of discourse has been for a long time felt; Kraemer, as is well-known, is its leading representative. Although the book under review is not likely to become the *magnum opus* of synthesis of the two types of approach to the study of the subject-matter, the awareness of having to do justice to both is one of the recognizable features of the work.

The author wisely makes a distinction between objectivity and what is professed as impartiality. He does not have any pretensions to the latter. In the place of impartiality—which he rules out as never really true in whatever case—he substitutes sympathy. He tells us 'There can be no such thing as absolute impartiality where vital matters are concerned; but sympathy with the sincere beliefs of others there must be' (p. ix). In other words, to put the matter in our own way, it amounts to saying that instead of pretending that the emotive attitudinal element can be eliminated, what is required—and practicable—is to introduce into it the right orientation.

This reviewer would agree with this opinion. The objective, although it is itself quite distinct and apart from the emotive attitudinal, has nevertheless got to function within the framework of that ineliminable element. However, what relationship sympathy has to objectivity, what really sympathy is and what

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<sup>1</sup> D. W. Gundry: *Religions*. London: Macmillan & Co. 1958. Pp. 189. Price: 16s. net.