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The Study of Church History

B. MANUEL

The subject-matter of Church History is Christ, His Church and Christianity: and therefore the study of Church History naturally raises for us the whole vital question of the relevance of Christ, His Church and Christianity for India. Further, the study of Church History is made all the more significant because it focuses our attention in a most important way on certain confusions which have arisen in the minds of thoughtful men, Christian and non-Christian, in India, among whom the following ideas relating to Christianity are becoming rapidly articles of faith:

1. Jesus Christ was a great religious Teacher, a venerable Bhakta, a noble Prophet, the ideal Yogin, a great Guru: One who realized God in Himself and therefore was enabled to manifest God to others. He certainly is one of the many revelations of Godhead through Manhood for mankind.

2. The Church is a human invention (mind-conceived and man-made) that was imposed upon the followers of Christ.

3. Christianity is totally foreign to the spiritual ethos of India, because it represents a view of life and a way of life which are peculiarly the view of life and the way of people who live in Western Europe.

4. In any case, both from the point of view of philosophical Truth and religious experience, all religions in their origin emanate from, and, therefore, in their destiny end up in, the One Supreme All-transcending Reality.

The result of such growing convictions is (i) that there is respect for the teachings of Christ as found in the Gospel accounts and interpreted in the Epistles of the New Testament, (ii) there is very often a conscious attempt to carry out the teachings of Jesus Christ in their personal life but (iii) there is an outright rejection of the Church as something that is totally foreign to the mind of Christ and as something that cannot be fitted into the Hindu rites and ceremonies, dogmas and institutions, (iv) along with this rejection of the Christian Church as an institution (i.e. a socio-religious entity), there is a condemnation of Christianity as something that is utterly foreign to the mind and heart of the people of this land.

This has led many people in India to distinguish between

the pure and simple Jesus-cult (like the Ramakrishna-cult) without the trappings on the one hand of *Churchianity* which is the institutional version (stamped through and through with legality and authoritarianism) of a race, not of India, with rites and ceremonies of religion belonging to the Anglo-Saxon appropriation of the Hebraic-Graeco-Roman experience of religion ; and, on the other hand, of *Christianity* which represents a view of life and a way of life of a people who grew up in every way without any reference to other spiritual inheritance and spiritual longings except that of the Mediterranean world.

EASTERN AND WESTERN VIEWPOINTS

For illustrating this, I mention two of the foremost exponents of World Culture, the one in terms of Western culture and the other in terms of Indian culture. I refer to Christopher Dawson and our own Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the greatest living exponent and interpreter of the Sanatana Dharma of Hinduism both in India and abroad.

Any study of religion which ignores and leaves on one side the accumulated experience of the Christian past and looks exclusively to the remote and partially incomprehensible evidence derived from the study of alien religious traditions or even to our own abstract notions of the nature of religion and the conditions of religious knowledge is bound to be not merely incomplete but insubstantial and unreal.

Christopher Dawson can well afford to say this in his *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, because for him the significance of the Western development (Chapter I of the book) is to be seen in the two-fold conviction that (i) there is a far greater material for the study of Western culture (when compared with any other) and the knowledge of such a culture is more intimate and internal. 'Western culture has been the atmosphere we breathe and the life we live ; it is our way of life and the way of life of our ancestors. We know it not merely by documents and monuments, but from our personal experience' (p. 3). (ii) In Christianity the religious development can be traced from the beginning to the end in the full light of history. He says: 'We know the historical environment in which Christianity first arose ; we possess the letters of the founders of the Churches to the first Christian communities of Europe, and we can trace in detail the successive stages by which the new religion penetrated the West' (p. 4). In other words, the vital subject of the creative interaction of religion and culture in the life of Western society can be studied objectively as an existential reality. When Lord Acton said, 'Religion is the key of history', it means naturally for a Westerner 'the clue to History is Jesus Christ'.

According to Dr. Radhakrishnan great spiritual revivals occur through the fusion of different traditions. To Dr. Radhakrishnan also the meeting of the East and West today may produce a

spiritual renaissance. Today the world is groping not for the narrow, stunted religion of dogmatic schools, not one of fanaticism that is afraid of the light, but for a creative spiritual religion (*East and West : Some Reflections*, p. 121). European History is the history of a series of renaissances, and behind the everchanging pattern of Western culture there is a living faith which provided Europe with a certain sense of spiritual community. He also reminds us of the fact that the vital function of religion is continuity, conservation and creativity.

Dr. Radhakrishnan says: When we speak of a historic culture we refer to the norms and beliefs which sustain it, the spiritual forces which determine the social framework. The very name Hindu India, Buddhist Asia, Western Christendom or Islamic Society suggests that spiritual traditions, philosophies of life underlie each society (*East and West : Some Reflections*, p. 17). But, he asserts, Truth is of the universal order. Beliefs and dogmas belong to the contingent order and, as such, are variable and changing while Truth is eternal and changeless. Truth itself is beyond the expression that can be found for it, therefore, there can be no perfect formulation of Truth (p. 25). Rites and ceremonies, systems and dogmas are not to be mistaken for Absolute Truth. They indicate but do not define Reality or confine Reality. 'The sign should not be mistaken for the thing signified. The signpost is not the destination' (p. 26). Dr. Radhakrishnan pleads that 'Christianity which is already "debtor both to Greeks and Barbarians" may gain considerably by the insights of Eastern Religion.' The inherited spiritual tradition of India must be reconciled with the acquired Christian doctrines.

I mention these two authors (not because I claim to have made an exhaustive study of their writings) but because to me they represent the specifically characteristic views of (i) those who are steeped in Western Christendom with its Gospel, Creed, Church, Cultus, and Culture; (ii) those who are equally steeped in Hinduism with its Vedanta, Creed, Society, Cultus, and Culture. To the Christian historian it would be natural enough (as in the case of Christopher Dawson) to accept Dr. Latourette's definition: The history of Christianity is the history of what God has done for man through Christ and of man's response. Again, for a Christian this means 'seeing the history of Christianity in its relation to the total story of mankind'. But to the non-Christian like Dr. Radhakrishnan, the B.C.-A.D. division of secular history means not for all, but only to the Westerner, a new era, a new vision, a new venture, because of the Great Act of God in Christ. He would agree readily that 'religion is the way to all history' but would not subscribe to the Christian conviction that the clue to all history is to be found only in the Person and the Work of Christ and the continuing of the Person and the Work of Christ in the Church which is the sphere here and now of the operation of the ever-present creative, redeeming and sanctifying activity of God the Holy Spirit.

CHRISTIANITY AND CHURCHIANITY

At the commencement of this essay I pointed out that the subject-matter of Church History is Christ, His Church, Christianity. It was also pointed out that for many Hindus and some Christians Christ, the seer, the mystic, the realizer of God, the son of God, an Incarnate deity, seems readily to be relevant to India for He can be fitted into the spirituality of Hinduism. Because in Christ as in Rama, or Krishna, or in more recent times (emphasizing historical reality) in Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo, we have God, we see God, we hear God, we experience God. But the Christian claim that the Church, the Body of Christ, is the only sphere of the realization of the true God then and now is anathema to them, because to them Church means the mere ecclesiastical polity of the Christians and as such they see it as a mere organization of the Christian Religion and *not* the Organism of the ever-present Living God. Naturally, they conclude that Christianity represents only the spiritual experience of the Western people, representing their philosophy of the spirituality underlying their total set-up of life within the confines of Western Christendom. This is because a distinction is made between the philosophical approach to the realization of the spirituality of man and the theological approach to the realization of God in Christ and the ecclesiastical approach to the appropriation of God in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in and through the Sacraments of the Church.

It is in this context that we must discuss the question of the relevance of Church History to India today. Further, I have heard it said by Indian Christians, (i) You have given us Jesus Christ. Why don't you leave us with Him and leave Him to us and allow Him to work out in us the purpose for us and through us to the world? Why do you bother us with Churchianity and Christianity within which you have confined Christ the Liberator? (ii) We are prepared to share with all Christians and work towards the destiny that awaits us even as we learn to grow up in Christ, grow up into the fulness of the stature of Christ, but how can we have a share in your spiritual heritage without having a share in our own spiritual heritage? (iii) An ordinand looking at the chart at the end of Lefever's 'History of the Reformation' refused point blank to be enthusiastic about the great heritage that is ours in the Church in India because of the various experiences and expositions of Christ we have received. I readily sympathized with him because the whole chart was one-sided. It was only a partial heritage philosophically, theologically and ecclesiastically speaking. (iv) When the C.S.I. was inaugurated there was naturally great rejoicing because of the Anglican, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian heritages that were being pooled together and poured into an emerging ecclesiastical pattern. Not very long ago I heard that now they no longer think in terms of ex-Anglican, ex-Methodist, etc., but Anglican

plus, Methodist plus, etc. But in either case, we see again an appropriation of the ecclesiastical pattern of Christian life without any conscious reference to the spirituality of the people of the region with their personal theism full of loving devotion and Bhakti, as in Ramanujā, the piety of the Thirukural and the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Yet, in spite of all that has been said so far, books like that of Bishop Walsh's *Lights and Shades of Christendom*, *The Heritage of the Indian Christian* by Sister Gertrude, the books of Godfrey Phillips and the slogan, 'The Younger Churches of Today are living through the experience of the Early Church', have attempted to show the relevance of Church History for India, but Church History can become really relevant to India only if it is taught as a summary of the entire history of Christianity beginning from the Church of Jehovah through the Redeemer Christ to the Church of the Jews, and thereafter beginning from Jerusalem unto the uttermost part of the earth. But the uttermost part of the earth does not terminate in the Mediterranean world winding up in Alexandrian, Antiochan and Byzantine Christianity. Nor does it terminate at Rome; nor does it terminate at the Council of Trent; nor does it terminate in Germany; nor does it terminate in London; nor does it terminate in New York.

The relevance of Church History to India is lessened because of cultural, political, national and ecclesiastical, not to mention the overall cultural termini (or ends), that have been taken to mean the uttermost part of the earth. Church History as it is taught and examined today is no more than the teaching and examination of the rise and development of Christianity in Western Christendom with grudging courtesy paid to the Eastern Churches and Indian Church History tagged on as a resultant of the commercial, political and adventurous enterprise of Christian peoples for whom ways and means were opened to propagate the Christian Faith in non-European lands. The result was a faithful reproduction of little denominational enclaves, with little catechetical schools and theological institutions into which were transplanted (though I readily see nothing else could have been done then) denominational doctrinal teachings. The result was that Church History was taught more and more to justify certain denominations. Ecclesiastical teaching of Church History is totally irrelevant to India though I believe it is absolutely relevant in the West.

The textbooks that we use for Church History are all right for those who understood Greek and Roman History, the rise and fall of mediaeval Europe and the history of the nation states of Modern Europe. Such books naturally give the impression that Church History is nothing but the study of Christianity and the

rise of Western culture or the origin, development and present state of Western Christendom.

All that I have sketched so far (very sketchy and certainly most elementary) is to suggest that we should distinguish between Christ, Christianity and the Church within the context of the Mediterranean world and Christ, Christianity and the Church within the context of mankind in the world. In this way we can be helped to distinguish between the *ecclesiology of the mission of the Church* and the *theology of the mission of the Church*.

To my mind, our inability in most cases and our unwillingness in some cases, to distinguish clearly the ecclesiastical pattern of the Church with its ecclesiastical expansion and the theological pattern of the Church with the spread of the Gospel of Christ is largely due to the way in which we approach the whole question of 'A History of Christianity'.

The study of Church History for us means only tracing the growth and development of Christianity in all its aspects from its days of Judaeo-Christian beginnings to the modern era through successive stages of Judaic Christianity, Gentile Christianity, East and West Gentile Christianity, Latin Christianity, Mediterranean Christianity, European Christianity (here we distinguish more clearly between Latin, Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon types) and the modern world Christianity (ways of modern European Missionary enterprises).

PARTIAL DEVELOPMENT OR WHOLE VISION ?

This has made us theologically, ecclesiastically, doctrinally and liturgically conditioned mostly by the Graeco-Roman world and its culture, though at times we like to say that after all the Hebraic elements of Christianity are there: our Old Testament is a constant reminder of this. We have mistaken a partial development in Christianity for its full, final and definitive development. We fail to realize the fact that wherever we might be, to whatever race we may belong, we have to say both collectively and individually, 'Without us they cannot be made perfect'. But what is happening today is that on the part of non-European peoples the saying, 'Without us you cannot be made perfect' seems to have been heeded to a good deal, and increasingly so on the part of the makers of the Western politico-social structure of society, because it becomes clear more and more on either side of the division today (between East and West) that 'without us they cannot be made perfect'. Alas, this is not so in the Church of the West. The makers and guardians of the Western Church have a much greater (and shall we say keener) sense of proprietorship in matters theological and ecclesiastical. They seem to say to the Christians of the non-European races, 'without us you cannot be made perfect', but never 'without you we cannot be made perfect'. How can there be real communication between a Gospel which has been hardened by a partial development and

those who have received the Gospel and are beginning to realize that they must learn more and more what it is for them to communicate this Gospel to their fellow-members who live by their faith in *living* non-Christian religions. This is because we do not recognize that Perfection theologically speaking belongs to the very Being of God, whereas doctrinally and liturgically speaking perfection belongs to the realm of believing and becoming. To my mind it is because of a confusion in the theology between Being, Becoming and Believing that the History of Christianity seems to be more and more the expansion and spread of the Western peoples whose religion is Christianity. The God of the Christians has come to mean today, and rightly too (because of the one-sided development of Christianity, i.e. without reference to any religious experience or philosophical thought outside the Graeco-Roman milieu), the God of the Western or European nations, nationally conceived, ecclesiastically interpreted and doctrinally justified, in order to suit the convenience of the expansion of the Western peoples with their growingly better-equipped culture for material advancement.

The negative, and often sneering superior attitude to the other religions on the part of Christians, Indian and non-Indian, is a faithful reflection of a state of mind and heart which refuses to understand that to behold the Glory and Truth of the Word made flesh, Christ must re-incarnate Himself through His Church in lands other than the West. Then and then only Hebrew-Greek-Latin Christianity can become what it was meant to be in the wisdom of God, Christ-in-humanity.

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