

HAS CHRISTIANITY A FUTURE?

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THERE are reasons for thinking that Christianity may not be the religion of the future, or even retain its historical significance. Sectarian divisions and rivalries are against it. These are not new but reach back to the earliest beginnings of Christianity and have greatly impeded its progress. The longing for Christian unity on the part of some of its representative votaries in all ages is both beautiful and pathetic and shows how thoroughly they deplored this almost fatal deficiency. Some of these divisions within Christianity are the result of doctrine, some of polity or government, some of usage and custom, and some are based on sacrament and worship. It is all too evident, however, that the number of Christian sects could be very greatly reduced and that the sectarian interest is, or seems to be for many more important than Christianity itself. That Christianity has been greatly weakened, and is weakened today, because of these numerous sects and divisions will hardly be denied. That there must in the nature of the case, be some divisions, will be most readily affirmed. Unity of thought in any sphere of endeavor is not easily attained, and is not yet in sight. Armenianism and Calvinism in the sphere of theology are no more compatible ideas than determinism, and indeterminism in the sphere of philosophy. Monarchy and democracy are likewise incompatible ideas.

Sacerdotalism and Quaker simplicity are at variance with each other. Granting then that there is at present no possible promise of Christian unity, there are still too many divisions, too many Christian sects, too many that are needless, useless, a mere expression of folly, waste, and senseless rivalry. Sometimes this sectarianism is likened to a military force, separate in its parts, but united with regard to its objective. The comparison is not well made. The waste, the dupli-

cation of effort, the petty antagonisms within Christianity are too pronounced to make the comparison worth while. The result, as many see it, means depleted vitality and final dissolution.

A second reason why Christianity gives little promise of being the religion of the future, is its numerical disparity. Statistics are very uncertain and unreliable at best, especially in relation to the religious faiths of mankind. Still they are a help to some extent in the sphere of religion and in other spheres. In respect to Christianity the latest statistics show clearly that it is almost hopelessly inferior in numbers as compared with the other religious forces of the world. The disparity as presented by Christian authority itself is something like four hundred millions. Unless some catastrophe not now in sight, overtakes the non-Christian cults, Christianity need hardly expect to convert or to absorb these millions. And yet Christianity has always been a missionary faith; has presented itself always as the only true and valid religion, and one that is eventually to absorb all others. The study of comparative religion, in more recent years, however, has changed the whole aspect of religion in many respects, while the history of Christianity clearly demonstrates that in many ways it is not different or superior to other cults, whether living or dead.

A third reason why Christianity is not likely to become the religion of the future is the unreliability of its historical and literary foundations. While Christianity bases its claims on subjective experience, and makes its appeal to experience, it is by no means a subjective faith only. It is, or is supposed to be, historical in origin, with an historical and literary background on which its subjective life depends. Assuming the background, the experience follows. Without the background, in part or in whole, the subjective experience called Christian must or at least may undergo a change. This is just what has occurred, and is occurring all around us—the historical and literary foundations on which the Christian structure has been raised is for many beginning to crumble and fall, and the subjective experience has suffered accordingly. This is the disadvantage that all religions have to meet that depend almost entirely on some personal founder, some incident, movement or miracle of history to create a valid religious experience. Christianity therefore can be, and is no exception in this respect. The records on which so much depends and often accepted are open to investigation, study, approval or

attack with each succeeding age, and each advance in knowledge. The Christian records—the New Testament scriptures—have for the last century or more been subjected to the keenest criticism and the most unrelenting scrutiny for the sole purpose of ascertaining the truth in relation to these scriptures—their origin, validity, purpose and content. The results obtained have brought about a tremendous change of thought in regard to these early documents. As the knowledge acquired becomes more widely diffused it cannot but add to the decreasing influence of the historical background on which Christianity is so dependent, and greatly impair its future.

A fourth reason why Christianity cannot guarantee its future is its almost universal and persistent antagonism of knowledge. This is the darkest page in the history of Christianity. What good it has done is seriously affected by this unfortunate and unreasonable attitude toward knowledge, this perpetual and insistent protest against the natural use of normal faculties. Almost every where, and at all, or most all times, reason has been decried and faith exalted. It is almost unbelievable to what extent Christianity, through its organized institutions has gone to retard advancing knowledge. Especially is this true in the sphere of natural sciences. The conflict has been a long and bitter one, and the end is not yet in view as to when this conflict will cease. It would seem that there is nothing the Church or Christianity can do, now or ever, to win back the confidence of those who know what it has cost real knowledge to acquire its freedom and establish itself. Belief as set over against knowledge, faith as set over against reason, this has been the burden of the Christian message. The gospels and the epistles are saturated with this spirit.

Faith is unduly emphasized and knowledge depreciated. Even ignorance is sometimes presented as an evidence of the worth of Christianity and the recipient of its mysteries. Christianity has followed only too closely the path its makers opened. This opposition to knowledge has cost, and is still costing the Church and Christianity immensely, and may mean ultimate extinction. For it seems certain that the religion of the future will not invalidate knowledge or eliminate the rational faculties.

Then too, Christianity is greatly impairing its future by persistently clinging to the supernatural and emphasizing doctrines that have ceased to be acceptable to many, if not discredited entirely. There are many who not only believe that the day of miracle is past.

but believe moreover that it never was. By clinging to doctrines that are more and more becoming untenable as knowledge advances, Christianity is fast weakening its influence and apparently hastening its decline. To affirm and insist that religion to be valid must necessarily be associated with such beliefs as miraculous intervention, vicarious atonement, Biblical infallibility, physical resurrection, an eternity of misery or of bliss is to demand more than many are willing to grant. It can be seen then that unless Christianity can divest itself of doctrines that are becoming more and more objectionable and readjust itself to conditions as they actually are, it cannot hope to become a universal religion.

Added to this doctrinal content, and its undoubted retarding effect on the future of Christianity is its failure as a moral incentive and moral objective. It is the province of all religions to emphasize the moral element, and all can be credited with so doing. No religion that has ever existed or that now exists, has been wholly indifferent to moral obligation. Mistakes there have been, serious and harmful as to what constituted human duty, but no religion has deliberately taught that to do evil is better than to do good. All have fallen short however, in bringing about a general social betterment for which so many earnest individuals have looked and longed. The failure of Christianity in this respect is no less conspicuous, if not even more conspicuous than other religious systems. Its failure is more conspicuous perhaps, for the reason that its claims, assumptions and promises have been more pronounced. Christianity in its earliest beginning taught that the kingdom of God was at hand. It has claimed and still claims to have the authority, power and equipment to revolutionize the world morally. What are the facts? Either its claims are unfounded, or it must be charged with wilful, deliberate and terrible failure. Either human nature is too degraded for the higher ideals ever to become realized, or Christianity is too weak and feeble to achieve its purpose. After two thousand years of effort, or it may be only seeming effort, the moral status of the world has not greatly advanced. And this too in spite of its supernatural claims. And the fact that much of the time it has had within its grasp, political and legislative power that could have greatly benefitted the world. The real difficulty has been, and is, that Christians themselves are without conviction as to the validity and worth of their own cult.

Until Christianity therefore, can, or will do better than it has done, there is no immediate or remote promise of its perpetuity.

Another and almost certain reason why Christianity as now constituted, cannot possibly be the religion of the future is its distinctly sectarian character. Allusion has already been made to the sects and divisions within Christianity, but Christianity itself is a sect, in the narrowest and strictest sense, and one of the most inhospitable of religions. Of course this will be denied by many and proofs demanded. The proofs are not far to seek. They are to be found in the exacting and dogmatic demands of Christianity that require belief in the supernatural and the miraculous, or the rejection of all those who do not comply with these demands. There is not, and never has been, the slightest note of the universal or of real tolerance in Christianity. Its way of salvation has been one way only, and it will not, and cannot admit of any other. The persistent claim that it is the only authoritative and revealed religion, it has not discarded and has no intention of discarding. But one will say, "Does not Christianity teach the fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of man, and is not this universalism?" Yes, this is universalism of the loftiest kind, but this alone does not constitute Christianity, or any other one religious system to make it valid. The difficulty here is, that one is thinking of the ethical content only, when the idea of fatherhood and brotherhood is made the essence and core of Christianity. It must be remembered however, that Christianity has a dogmatic as well as an ethical content; that it is a system of thought as well as a way of life; and that it is the dogmatic element that has been most pronounced in connection with Christianity. Nor can Christianity be divested of dogma and preserve its historical connection. Liberalism, so called, in all its forms, so it seems to many at least, is manifestly illogical when it tries to eliminate the dogmatic element from Christianity and yet retain its name. The attempt to go back to the historical Jesus and make a distinction as to what he taught, and what Christianity is, or to choose between the religion of Jesus and a religion about Jesus does not greatly help. The gospel records are too vague and too uncertain to make the attempt promising, and at times makes Jesus the most imperative and dogmatic of men. It seems impossible therefore, since Christianity historically considered, is a system of thought as well as a way of life, to think of it as a universal cult. And after all, what value is there

to be attached to a name. When doctrines that have so long been held essential to Christianity, when the supernatural and the miraculous have been discarded, what is there left to justify the name Christian? If liberalism then, in any or all of its forms, really wishes to establish the kingdom of God on earth, and if that kingdom is comprehended in the idea of Fatherhood and brotherhood, it would seem that it can do so much more rapidly and much more effectively by discarding the name Christian. Divine Fatherhood and human brotherhood, devotion and social equity do represent the universal. They are not sectarian, nor original with Christianity, but have been in the world to some extent, and in some measure, ever since religion has passed the stage of fetichism.

If Christianity lacks then the universal note and gives little promise of being the ultimate religion, what is to be the future faith of mankind? There is no answer to that question at present. All that can be said is the future religion must in some sense, be eclectic; it will gather from all faiths that have ever been, and now are, and by a synthesis create a real and lasting theism, if religion is to be at all. For the man who has been able to construct for himself a satisfactory substitute for the idea of God, no religion will be needed. For others, the basis for the coming faith already exists, namely this: "Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us? And, "He hath shewed thee, O man what is good; and what doth the walk humbly with thy God." Lord require of thee but to do justly and to love kindness, and to