
Faith and Understanding

CRITICAL ESSAYS IN
CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

BY

Arthur J. Long, M.A.

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Arthur J. Long
M.A. (Oxon)

*(Tutor in Philosophy and Modern Doctrine at
the Unitarian College, Manchester)*

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PREFACE

THE essays in this volume are based on a series of articles written for *The Inquirer* several years ago, at the invitation of the then Editor, the Rev. E. G. Lee. The articles made no great pretension to original scholarship and were primarily designed as pieces of popular religious journalism. But they seem to have aroused considerable interest and it was several times suggested that they might be made available in a more permanent form.

After considerable delay due to the pressure of other duties, I have now revised and adapted them for publication. I should like to place on record here my sincere appreciation of the encouragement given to me in the original enterprise by the Rev. E. G. Lee, and my gratitude for helpful suggestions from various correspondents and from Dr. Dorothy Tarrant, who also gave some assistance in preparing the manuscript for the press. The content of the articles remains substantially unaltered, but I have arranged the topics in a more logical sequence and have added footnotes and additional comments where necessary. In one or two cases, where I was dissatisfied with the original, the article has been more or less re-written.

Though the book has been written from a frankly denominational point of view, and is primarily intended for Unitarians, I hope that it may perhaps commend itself also to all who still find precious truth

in the Christian tradition, but who are grieved by the extent to which that truth is so often obscured by a false dogmatism which ignores the fact that Christianity began as a liberal movement, and has only flourished when it has remained true to the spirit of liberal rationality. The original articles were dedicated to the proposition that theology and doctrine are a most necessary element in rational religion and the present essays are firmly based on the same premise. I have always regarded the words of the late A. E. Taylor in his *Faith of a Moralist* as a perpetual challenge: "The reason why so many of us resent all attempts to put our convictions about God into clear doctrinal form is an uneasy suspicion that, if we were quite honest with ourselves, we should find that we have no real convictions to support our emotionalism."¹ It is surely up to those of us who repudiate the charge of mere emotionalism, and who believe that our liberal persuasions are based on solid conviction, to be prepared on every occasion to give reasons for the hope that is in us. By exercise and argument, we must be ever ready to challenge the traditionalists intelligently on their own ground, and to consider objectively "the faith once and for all delivered"—in the firm persuasion that though it certainly includes much nonsense, it also enshrines essential truth.

The general title of the original articles, which I have retained for the book, is taken from a quotation ascribed by a psychologist² to Rousseau: "Faith is made sure by understanding. The best of all religions is the clearest." It has been suggested to me that the

¹ Vol. II., p. 101.

² R. B. Cattell in *Psychology and the Religious Quest*, p. 174.

quotation is singularly inept, in that no-one was more opposed to this principle than Rousseau himself. But perhaps this very fact can be used to point a moral. Rousseau does indeed bear a heavy responsibility for popularizing the dangerous notion that religion is a matter of the heart rather than the head. As Bertrand Russell has pointed out, this "new theology of the heart" takes religion right out of the realm of argument. But in so doing, it reduces it to nothing more than pleasant dreams. "If I had to choose," says Russell, "between Thomas Aquinas and Rousseau, I should unhesitatingly choose the Saint."³

This is an attitude which I whole-heartedly endorse—except that, writing primarily as a heretic for heretics, I would place before St. Thomas one of our own company, namely the great Peter Abelard: "By doubting," he says, "we come to enquiry, and through enquiry we grasp the truth, as the Truth himself hath said: 'Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you.'"⁴

ARTHUR J. LONG.

³ *History of Western Philosophy*, p. 721.

⁴ In the preface to *Sic et Non* quoted G. G. Coulton, *Studies in Medieval Thought*, p. 120.

I

TWO NATURES—ONE PERSON

THE *Radio Times* once published a Passiontide article by the late Dorothy Sayers entitled "The Execution of God". The reference, of course, was to the Crucifixion, and it embodied what is commonly regarded as the normal Christian attitude towards Jesus. As most of the B.B.C. religious propagandists never tire of reminding us, for Christianity, Jesus Christ was not a man at all. He was God. It was none other than the great Lord of all things, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe who was born in a stable, and who walked the dusty roads of Palestine long ago, speaking as never man spake. It was God himself in human form who died on the Cross and rose again in triumph.

Unfortunately (or fortunately, perhaps, from the Unitarian point of view), the doctrine of the Incarnation is by no means as simple or straightforward as this. It should indeed be noted that Dorothy Sayers' pungent reference to "the execution of God" did produce a protest in a later issue of the *Radio Times*. It came, not from a Unitarian, but from an Anglican, who pointed out, quite correctly, that to call Jesus "God" without qualification, is heresy. The proper designation for Jesus is "God the Son" or "God Incarnate". From the Unitarian point of view there is a most appropriate irony in the fact that the original credal

basis of the World Council of Churches, by which Unitarians were from the first excluded—"a fellowship of Churches which accept the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour"—is itself heresy.¹ For the orthodox, Jesus may be God Incarnate, God the Word, or the Second Person in Trinity, but he is not God.

The precise significance of this subtle distinction becomes apparent if one examines in more detail the idea of the Incarnation, which is often completely misunderstood, both by those who support and those who reject it. Most Christians, for example, probably think of Jesus as a bodily materialization of the Deity. They regard him in much the same way as the Lycaonians regarded Paul and Barnabas—God come down in the likeness of men.² Not only would this appear to be the normal position of the average Christian. Most critics of Christianity also assume that this is what Christians believe. But in actual fact, official Christianity does not support this view at all. If taken literally, the idea of Jesus as God in the likeness of men inevitably suggests that the body of Jesus was in some sense unreal, a mere phantasmal appearance. This was in fact one of the earliest heresies, that known as Docetism,³ and orthodox Christianity has always emphatically repudiated it. Nor does the Church teach that Jesus was simply a human body animated by a divine soul. The official Christian view is that he was an ordinary normal human being, in whom, by some

¹ The present basis, adopted at the New Delhi Assembly of December 1961, which even more effectively excludes Unitarians, in that it is specifically Trinitarian, still perpetrates the same error.

² Acts 14¹¹.

³ From the Greek for "to seem or appear". It is worth noting that the Fourth Gospel is aware of and challenges this heresy.

mysterious and unexplained process, there dwelt the fulness of the Godhead bodily. "In the beginning", says the Fourth Gospel, "was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us".¹ But the dwelling place of the Word was not a mere human body. It was a full, real, complete human being—Jesus of Nazareth. "Take away the action of the Word of God", said William Temple, "and what we have left is *not* the body, but the body-soul complex, the personality of Jesus of Nazareth the prophet".²

*

In other words, there were in Jesus two complete and separate natures, the one human and the other divine—two natures in one person. The orthodox, therefore, are not in the least concerned to deny the full humanity of Jesus. Indeed, it is incumbent upon them to affirm it. It is precisely for this reason that some modern orthodox Christians have been led to deny such dogmas as the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Official Christianity, no less than Unitarianism, insists that Jesus of Nazareth was a real and perfectly normal human being.

But what of the Divine element in his nature, the fulness of the Godhead so mysteriously foisted upon him? Here we arrive at the heart of the problem, a problem which, to this day, official Christianity has never solved. For the orthodox, Jesus was perfect God as well as perfect man. God was personally present in Jesus in some sense other than that in which he is present in all prophet-souls. But how are we to under-

¹ John 1^{1, 14}.

² Quoted in A. C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion*. p. 185.

stand the relationship between the divine and the human in Jesus, and how can two utterly distinct natures exist in one person? To this all-important question, there has never been a satisfactory answer. Doctrinally, the last word is with the declaration issued at the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451): "One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-Begotten, acknowledged in two natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably, the difference in nature being in no way removed because of the union, but rather the properties of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one substance". But as the more candid among the orthodox readily admit, this merely states the problem and does not in any way solve it.

*

The essential futility of the doctrine of the two natures is perhaps amply demonstrated by the suggestion sometimes advanced nowadays that Jesus himself was unaware of his own divinity. At no time during his earthly existence, it is said, did he ever think of himself as God, or imply that he was God—but, of course, we Christians, being more privileged than he was, now know that he was God all the time! It would be difficult to imagine a more absurd doctrine—and yet, in a certain sense, it does represent the logical conclusion of the two natures in one person.

Official Christianity sometimes presents an alluring simplicity. What could be more uncomplicated, for example, than the affirmation of the children's Christmas hymn: "He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all"? But let us beware. The simplicity is only apparent. Behind it there lie the

verbal gymnastics and absurdities of Chalcedon—and in comparison with this, Unitarianism, with its faith in the simple and unequivocal humanity of Jesus, is perhaps not unworthy to be reckoned as "Christianity in its simplest and most intelligible form".

II

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND
VIRGIN BIRTH

POSSIBLY two of the most vulnerable aspects of traditional Christianity are the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and Virgin Birth. According to Christian orthodoxy (in the West), Jesus, though perfect man, was born of a virgin, who had been immaculately conceived. The two dogmas are frequently confused, and it is commonly assumed that they are alternative titles for the same notion. In actual fact they are quite separate and distinct.

The Virgin Birth relates to Jesus, and is accepted by all orthodox Christians. It affirms that Jesus had no human father, but was conceived in his mother's womb through the direct miraculous intervention of the Holy Ghost. The Immaculate Conception on the other hand refers to the conception of the Virgin Mary in the womb of her mother, St. Anne, and though Anglo-Catholics probably approve of it nowadays, it is normally accepted by Roman Catholics only, and it has no direct connexion with the birth of Jesus. I begin with a discussion of the Immaculate Conception.

The doctrine, as finally stated by the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, proclaimed by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854, says that "from the first moment of her conception, the Blessed Virgin Mary was, by the singular grace

and privilege of Almighty God, and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, kept free from all stain of Original Sin". In other words, the transmission of the hereditary taint of Original Sin, which, according to Catholic teaching, occurs automatically whenever a human being is conceived, was, by divine grace, miraculously suspended in the case of the Virgin Mary, so that she alone among all women was born free from Original Sin. This is held to have been a necessary preparation for the birth of Jesus.

Though accepted as dogma at the present time, the idea of the Immaculate Conception represents one of several elements of Roman doctrine about which there was formerly endless controversy. The Feast of the Conception of the Virgin (December 8) had been observed since comparatively early times, but there were constant arguments as to whether the conception was immaculate or not. Most of the great mediaeval philosophers, including Albert the Great, St. Bonaventura and St. Thomas Aquinas, rejected it. But Duns Scotus and the Franciscans generally supported it, and from the 16th Century onwards, its acceptance became general. But it is always worth remembering that it was not made an official dogma until as recently as 1854. This, therefore, is one of several matters on which the Roman Church's claim to have been *semper eadem* ("always the same") clearly breaks down. The essential recentness of the idea of the Immaculate Conception is underlined by its close association with the famous wonder-working grotto-shrine at Lourdes. When the young peasant girl, St. Bernadette, experienced her visions of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes in 1858—visions which ultimately led to the establishment

of the shrine—she always alleged that the Virgin introduced herself with the words: "I am the Immaculate Conception". It should also be noted that the Eastern Orthodox Churches have never accepted the doctrine, and this still remains one of the main points of difference, on doctrinal matters, between the two great wings of traditional Christianity.

It might perhaps be thought that the idea of the Immaculate Conception is so fanciful as to be of very little interest to non-Romans. But from one point of view, it does seem to be a logical precondition of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Jesus, which the majority of Christians of all shades of orthodox opinion still take for granted. According to the Virgin Birth, Jesus had no human father. But since, in the words of an old carol, it was from his mother that "he took fleshly substance" it is difficult to see how he could have been free from the taint of Original Sin, unless his mother had also been free from it herself. Seeing therefore, that it is essential for orthodoxy to affirm the absolute sinlessness of Jesus, some sort of immaculate conception for his mother would seem to be a vital necessity. On the other hand, from another point of view, the Immaculate Conception appears to be totally unnecessary. It is, by definition, miraculous, like the Virgin Birth itself. Would not it have been much more simple therefore to have had Jesus born of a virgin *and* immaculately conceived?

In actual fact of course, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception obviously represents an attempt to justify the exalted position of the Virgin Mary in the Roman cult. For centuries, Mary has been worshipped as a goddess—a fascinating reminder of the yearning of

the human heart for a mother symbol—and a goddess obviously demands some unique immaculate status, especially in a movement which has never altogether thrown off a certain uneasiness regarding what would nowadays be described as "the facts of life". This latter point also furnishes a clue to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, to which we now turn.

From the earliest times, Christians have maintained that Jesus had no human father, and that he was born, not as the consequence of normal sexual intercourse, but through the direct action of the Holy Ghost upon his mother. The doctrine was explicitly taught by Ignatius (died c. A.D. 110), and it formed a part of the earliest creeds in both East and West.

An extension of the dogma, dating from the fourth century, is the idea of the Perpetual Virginity of Mary. This affirms that Mary was entirely innocent of any sort of sex experience; that she remained a virgin in the technical, medical sense, even after the birth of Jesus, and that the brethren of Jesus referred to in the New Testament were, in fact, step-brethren—the children of Joseph by a previous marriage. This notion of perpetual virginity still forms an essential part of Catholic doctrine, but it is not pressed by other Christians. It is worth noting that it makes the actual birth of Jesus—the physical process by which he came into the world—a miracle of the first order, quite apart from the question of his conception. One would have thought that this might have commended it to *all* traditional Christians, but apparently, where miracles are concerned, no less than in other matters, one can have too much of a good thing.

The dogmatic fitness of the idea of the Virgin Birth

—especially in relation to the idea of the Incarnation—has often been stressed. But it is probably true to say that no other single aspect of traditional Christianity has been more challenged in modern times, and it is now generally rejected by all liberals and modernists, as well as by some middle-of-the-road Christians.

*

The doctrine can be challenged on two grounds: firstly, as an instance of spurious supernaturalism; and secondly, because of inadequate scriptural evidence. That the Virgin Birth was affirmed from the first as a tremendous miracle is obvious. As such, it has been frequently used to support the claims made by the Church on behalf of Jesus. It was even accepted by some Unitarians in former days, as proving, for example, his Messiahship. This makes the arguments of those modern apologists who would have us believe that virgin birth is not an impossibility, look particularly silly. It is of course quite true that parthenogenesis is not unknown in the insect world. It is also true that some biologists do not consider it impossible among mammals, or even in man, and are willing to concede that it may actually have occurred. But to use this as an argument for the Virgin Birth is tantamount to saying that the birth of Jesus is unique because it is not unique. Traditionally, the whole point of the notion of the Virgin Birth has been in its miraculousness. But since most modern liberals repudiate the idea of the miraculous, the concept of virgin birth, for Jesus or for anyone, has to be set aside.

Quite apart from the general question of miracles, however, what of the New Testament evidence? It

has been generally assumed that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is certainly scriptural. Yet in actual fact, the New Testament as a whole ignores it. There is nothing in *Mark*, nothing in *John* (the first and the last of the Gospels) and nothing in Paul. Two passages in Paul's letters, "born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal. 4⁴) and "born of the seed of David according to the flesh" (Rom. 1³), would seem to imply belief in the human paternity of Jesus, and the Fourth Gospel makes both the Jews (6⁴²) and Jesus' followers (1⁴⁵) refer to him as the son of Joseph. It is always worth bearing in mind that the New Testament is very concerned to prove that Jesus was descended from David—as, of course, the Messiah should have been. The elaborate genealogies in *Matthew* and *Luke*¹ (each slightly different, incidentally), specifically designed to prove his Davidic descent, both assume that Joseph was his father. To argue, as Catholic apologists do, that Mary was also of Davidic descent, or that the genealogies are valid because Joseph was the legal father, is pure expediency.

The only support for the Virgin Birth in the New Testament is found in the first chapter of *Matthew* and the first two chapters of *Luke*. Yet even in *Luke*, the only indisputable evidence is in Chap. 1, verses 34 and 35: "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? etc." But as has often been pointed out, there are many other passages in *Luke* supporting the idea of normal parenthood, and even in the Annunciation story itself there is a reference to "the throne of *his father* David" (1³²). It may very well be, therefore, that verses 34 and 35 are an interpolation. The

¹ Matt. 1¹⁻¹⁶ and Luke 3²³⁻³⁸.

Annunciation would then become a simple announcement, according to a frequent Old Testament pattern, of a forthcoming birth of supreme importance. The ambivalence of *Luke*, as it now stands, is clearly illustrated in 3²³: "being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph". Here again, the words in brackets could very well be a later insertion.

Matthew, which includes the slightly unpleasant story of Joseph's grave suspicions when his betrothed is found to be with child (Matt. 1^{18 ff.}), is much more explicit. But the historical validity of the first two chapters of *Matthew* is very dubious, and in 1²²⁻²³ the real source of the whole doctrine is clearly revealed. It obviously sprang from a mistaken interpretation of a famous passage in Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." (7¹⁴). This particular "prophecy" has been the cause of endless controversy, but it is now generally agreed that, originally, a miraculous birth was not envisaged. The traditional view rests on a mistranslation, first perpetrated by the Septuagint, the ancient Jewish-Greek version, of the Hebrew word '*almah*, which means "young woman" and *not* "virgin". If the prophet had wished to emphasize the miraculous nature of the birth, he would obviously have used the Hebrew word for "virgin"—which is *b'thulah*, and not '*almah*. The significance of the "sign" offered by Isaiah lay in the faith of the mother, reflected in the name which she would give the baby—"God with Us"—and not in the manner of his birth.

In any case, while it is probable that, by New Testament times, the passage was widely interpreted as a Messianic oracle, it cannot possibly be regarded as a literal prophecy of the birth of Jesus. This is made

quite clear by the context. King Ahaz, for whom the "sign" was expressly intended, is unlikely to have been convinced by something not due to happen for 700 years!

In conclusion, it must always be remembered that the claim of virgin birth has not been made for Jesus alone. It was also claimed for some of the other great teachers of antiquity, notably for Plato and for the Buddha. The reason for this, of course, is that same uneasiness regarding the facts of birth and sex, to which we have already referred, and which, clearly, has not been confined to Christianity alone. Men have apparently found it very hard to believe that a supreme moral teacher could have come into the world as the consequence of something so unmentionable as sexual intercourse! While it is regrettably obvious that this preposterous notion still survives in certain quarters, for intelligent and informed opinion there is, of course, nothing impure or unholy about the idea of sex as such. In the last analysis therefore, the whole concept of virgin birth is unnecessary. There is clearly nothing derogatory to even the highest and holiest of men in the fact of normal conception and birth.

We may even take the matter further. If, as even Christian orthodoxy affirms, Jesus was "perfect man" (whatever else he may or may not have been), an expression which, in this context, means a perfectly normal human being, whole and complete, are we not bound to assume that his birth and paternity were normal? It is for this very reason that many otherwise orthodox Christians now reject the Virgin Birth. There is, indeed, no necessary connexion between the Virgin Birth and the Incarnation, or the idea of Jesus as the

Second Person in Trinity. The whole notion of a virgin "with child by the Holy Ghost" is, in fact, akin to pagan mythology, and far more conducive to heresy than to orthodox Christian belief.

The alternative to virgin birth in the case of Jesus is not illegitimacy, despite a malicious early tradition to this effect. There is no reason at all why we should not assume that Jesus was born in wedlock, and that he was, in fact, what most of the New Testament implies: the first-born son of a large family. This does not mean that we need to be over-meticulous in our rejection, particularly in a devotional or aesthetic context, of such expressions as "the Blessed Virgin". In the past, Unitarians have perhaps been too ready to impose their own censorship on hymns and carols. There is probably no great harm in singing, particularly at Christmas time, of the "maiden that is makeless"—provided we remember, with the rational half of our minds, that this is merely a quaint myth which became tacked on to Christianity at an early date, a myth which, though hallowed by art and tradition, is now completely devoid of any real significance.

III

"WHO DIED TO SAVE US ALL"

It is sometimes said that the only place where all Christians are united is at the foot of the Cross. That there is some truth in this view it would be hard to deny—especially when the name Christian is confined to "those within the main stream of Christianity".

But in a deeper sense, Christians are not even united on the subject of the Atonement. There has never been any official formulation of the doctrine, and various different views have emerged during the course of Christian history. What is more, it is probably in relation to the Atonement that Unitarians feel themselves most at variance with official Christianity. As the late Dr. Hastings Rashdall pointed out in his notable Bampton Lectures on *The Idea of the Atonement*, modern Unitarianism began quite as much as a protest against the traditional doctrine of the Atonement as against the traditional view of the Trinity.¹ It was James Martineau who said that there are some ways of denying the Trinity which are spiritually less true than some ways of affirming it. But with the Atonement it is a very different matter. What could be more philosophically absurd and morally revolting, for example, than C. F. Alexander's popular hymn "There is a green hill far away"? It is almost in-

¹ Bampton Lectures for 1915. Note on p. 438.

credible that the following lines are still widely accepted as a valid statement of the idea of the Atonement:

“There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin.
He only could unlock the gate
Of Heaven, and let us in.

He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to Heaven,
Saved by his precious blood.”

*

One sometimes wonders what the author of the Parable of the Prodigal Son would have thought of such moral barbarism. The real problem, of course, for those who long for a rational and enlightened form of Christianity is why this particular hymn should remain so extraordinarily popular. Even nominal Unitarians have been known to ask, in wide-eyed innocence, why it does not appear in our hymn books. Perhaps we need to recognize more than we have done, that it is exceedingly difficult for man to free himself entirely from the influence of certain archetypal myths, and that deep in the recesses of the unconscious mind, such ideas as the dying god and the efficacy of blood sacrifice still grip.

Recognition of this fact, however, does not necessarily imply its passive acceptance. In this, as in much else, Christians constantly need to be reminded (as Paul was always reminding his converts in the early days) that they must put away childish things and grow up. One of the most significant aspects of contemporary American Unitarianism is the emphasis

which it places on what it calls “the religion of the mature mind”. But what is perhaps needed above all from Liberal Christians is a deeper recognition of the significance of the Cross.

It is not true to say that we are precluded by our very presuppositions from seeing any real significance in the Cross. After all, it was a Unitarian, Sir John Bowring, who wrote “In the Cross of Christ I glory”. A Unitarian interpretation of the Atonement is not impossible. We already have one in what is usually called the subjectivist view, advocated by the Socinians in the sixteenth century, and at an even earlier date by the daring and brilliant mediaeval scholar, Peter Abelard (1079–1142).

The view is perhaps best summed up in the words of Abelard’s disciple, Peter the Lombard: “So great a pledge of love having been given to us, we are both moved and kindled to love God who did such great things for us; and by this, we are justified, that is, being loosed from our sins, we are made just. The death of Christ, therefore, justifies us inasmuch as through it, love is stirred in our hearts”.¹

*

The great advantage of such an interpretation is that it avoids the cardinal error of treating the death of Jesus in isolation from his life. The death of Jesus only becomes an effective atonement—something which makes us at one with God—when it is seen as the completion and consummation of that revelation of the nature of God which was the entire object of the mission and message of Jesus. Evangelical Christians

¹ Quoted Rashdall, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

constantly need to be reminded that their favourite Johannine text—"God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son"¹—is a meditation on the Incarnation and not on Calvary. The Cross derives its significance not from any barbaric notions of ransom, propitiation, or satisfaction, but from the fact that it does tower above the wrecks of time as the supreme symbol of that self-giving which characterized the entire life of Jesus, and as a sombre reminder that the love and service of God by no means exclude the possibility of suffering.

As Dr. A. C. Bouquet has said: "The possibility of the Cross for any man, even for the best and highest of men, is dependent upon the certainty of the Cross as the fundamental element in the life of God."² The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church, in what Bernard Shaw describes somewhere as an unaccustomed flash of insight, characterize God as being "without body, parts or passions", and all forms of orthodoxy have always been at pains to emphasize that God cannot suffer. According to official Christian doctrine, it was the human element in Jesus, and not the divine, which suffered on the Cross. To argue otherwise is to be guilty of the heresy of Patripassianism. Many of us will feel, however, despite the unexpected alliance of G.B.S. and orthodoxy, that the Old Testament idea of a God who is "afflicted in all our afflictions"³ is much nearer to the truth. "If God is good", says Rashdall, "if he is loving, if he looks upon men as his children . . .

¹ John 3¹⁶.

² *Jesus*—Modern Handbooks on Religion, Vol. 6, p. 79.

³ Isa. 63⁹. The whole passage 63⁷–64¹² is a remarkable tribute to Jewish insight.

he must in some sense suffer in or with his creatures. . . . A God who could contemplate such a world as ours without suffering would not be a loving God, nor would he be in the least like Christ".¹

This, then, is the "objective" element in the liberal interpretation of the Atonement. The Cross is the symbol of the suffering of God as well as the suffering of man. The life and death of Jesus (and of all others who have given themselves for truth) for ever make it plain that self-sacrifice and self-giving represent the highest that we know—"the secret way of the Universe and the primary condition of the art of a good human life"²—just because it is the very law of God's own being. In this sense, and this sense only, we may agree that Jesus died for our salvation.

¹ Rashdall, *op. cit.*, p. 453.

² A. C. Bouquet, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

which begins with an objective assessment of the evidence. St. Paul says that Jesus died and rose again according to the Scriptures. He means the Old Testament, of course. But our basic evidence lies in what has come to be regarded as the specifically Christian section of the Scriptures—the New Testament—beginning with the letters of Paul himself. Writing to the Christians at Corinth, somewhere round about A.D. 50, he says that Christ was “raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas; then to the twelve; then he appeared to above five hundred brethren at once . . . then he appeared to James; then to all the apostles; and last of all, as unto one born out of due time, he appeared to me also”.¹ This is the earliest evidence we have for the resurrection tradition, and it is worth noting that already some twenty years have elapsed since the events it describes. The much more detailed and circumstantial evidence contained in the Gospels belongs to a later period still—not earlier than A.D. 65 in the case of *Mark*, and as late as A.D. 110, if not later, in the case of *John*.

*

Unfortunately, the evidence contained in the Gospels² does not always agree with that of Paul. What is more, the Gospels do not agree on matters of detail, and each story itself is not without internal contradictions. All agree that the tomb of Jesus was found empty two days after his burial (three days according to the Jewish method of reckoning). But *Matthew* and the appendix

¹ 1 Cor. 15 4-8.

² Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20 and 21.

IV

“HE ROSE AGAIN THE THIRD DAY”

WHILE Unitarians reject out of hand the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, their attitude to the Resurrection has always been less uncompromising. At Easter, most of us join with enthusiasm in singing many of the traditional hymns. Yet it is very doubtful whether any of us now accepts the traditional Christian belief in a literal Resurrection. I still recall the impact made on my youthful mind many years ago by a challenging Unitarian Easter sermon. If it could ever be proved beyond all doubt, said the preacher,¹ that Jesus Christ, having been crucified, dead and buried, really and literally rose from the tomb on the third day, far from sending him into transports of joy, the fact would reduce him to utter scepticism and dismay.

This has always seemed to me to be a valid position. What then are we to make of what has been, from the first, the basic Christian claim—namely that Jesus, within three days after his death on the Cross, came to life again and rose from the tomb? One way of dealing with the claim is simply to challenge the validity of the whole idea of supernatural events, not to mention certain prior assumptions regarding the nature of Jesus. But a more fruitful approach to the question is that

¹ The Rev. Lawrence Redfern at Ullet Rd., Liverpool, Easter 1938.

to *John* (Chap. 21) place the chief resurrection appearances in Galilee, whereas *Luke* says that Jesus appeared in and around Jerusalem only. *Luke* and *John* claim that the Risen Christ had a body of flesh and bone, identical with his physical body before death and recognizable by the wounds sustained in crucifixion. They also refer pointedly to the eating of food.¹ But *John* also says that he was able to pass through locked doors, and *Luke*, in his story of the walk to Emmaus, suggests that Jesus was so changed that two of his disciples did not even recognize him. He also makes the surprising claim that when they did recognize him, he suddenly vanished.² *Matthew*, in his much simpler narrative, seems to imply (apart from the episode of the Empty Tomb) a spiritual rather than a bodily resurrection.³ The whole issue is complicated by the fact that the original ending of *Mark*, the earliest of the Gospels, is missing.⁴ But too much should not be read into this, for the Gospel is obviously designed to lead up to an account of a resurrection appearance, probably in Galilee. Some critics are of the opinion that the Marcan tradition is preserved in *John* 21.

But perhaps even more important than the conflicts between the Gospel narratives, is the disagreement between the Gospels and Paul. Paul says that Jesus appeared first of all to Cephas—i.e. Peter—and then

¹ The references to the physical body are *Luke* 24³⁹⁻⁴⁰ and *John* 20^{20, 25-27}. On the question of food cf. *Luke* 24⁴¹⁻⁴³ and *John* 21¹². It is perhaps worth noting that *John* does not actually say that Jesus himself ate anything.

² *Luke* 24¹³⁻³⁵. For the incident of the doors, see *John* 20¹⁹⁻²⁶.

³ Cf. the significance of the last words of the Gospel; 28^{20B}.

⁴ The story ends abruptly in the middle of 16⁸. The remaining verses (9-20) are a spurious later addition.

to the twelve. But this is not supported by the Gospels as they stand, though the original ending of *Mark*, now lost, may conceivably have contained an account of a special appearance to Peter. (According to tradition, *Mark's* Gospel is dependent on the reminiscences of Peter.) It has also been argued (not very convincingly) that Peter was the unidentified disciple in the Lucan story of the walk to Emmaus.

There is certainly nothing in the Gospels to confirm the reference of an appearance to "five hundred of the brethren at once"—which is somewhat remarkable. But the most significant feature of Paul's evidence is the fact that he does not make any mention of the Empty Tomb. This, coupled with his surprising statement later in the chapter that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God",¹ definitely suggests that he has not been speaking of a bodily resurrection at all. It is surely significant that he puts the appearance of Jesus to himself on the Damascus road—something which most people nowadays would describe as a "vision"—in precisely the same category as the first appearances to the disciples.

One of the best treatments of the problem of the New Testament basis of the Resurrection claim is still that in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* of 1907 (edited by Cheyne and Black) where the whole matter is exhaustively discussed. We are, I think, entitled to conclude that the evidence for a bodily resurrection is by no means as strong as is sometimes claimed. But it is obvious that this does not dispose of the matter. We have still to explain how the tradition arose, and why within at the most 50 years after the Crucifixion, the Christians

¹ 1 Cor. 15⁵⁰.

were convinced that Jesus had showed himself alive after his passion by many proofs¹—to quote from the prologue to *Acts*.

There have been a variety of attempts to do this. A favourite rationalist theory, still sometimes canvassed, is the suggestion that Jesus never really died—that he was only presumed to be dead when taken down from the Cross, and that he afterwards revived in the tomb. There is some slight evidence in favour of this view. We are told that Jesus died after a mere three hours on the Cross, and that Pilate was surprised that he should have died so soon.² The whole point of crucifixion from the Roman point of view was that it entailed a slow and lingering death. But it is surely obvious that death must have been swift in many cases, especially when, as with Jesus, the fixing to the Cross followed immediately on the unspeakable savagery of a Roman scourging. But the real objection, surely, to the theory that Jesus never died, lies in its implications. Are we to assume that the whole Christian Church was founded on a deliberate fraud or a stupid mistake? The obvious fact that Jesus had died a criminal's death was a source of great embarrassment to the early Christians which they were at great pains to explain away.

Similar considerations apply to the even more fantastic theory that all that happened was that the women went to the wrong tomb. Theories of hallucination or blatant deception on the part of the disciples are also unlikely, and the view that spirit materialization provides the best explanation obviously raises the whole question of the validity of "spiritualism". Perhaps we are bound to recognize that there will always be an

¹ Acts 1³.

² See Mark 15⁴⁴.

element of mystery surrounding the death of Jesus. There are those who find the hypothesis of "objective vision" helpful.¹ Starting from a frank recognition that the Empty Tomb tradition is dubious, the "objective vision" hypothesis, which is not without difficulties, affirms that the appearances of Jesus were spiritual, but not subjective.

Possibly the best solution of all is the view that the resurrection claim first arose from an intense conviction, gradually formed in the mind of the apostles, that Jesus had triumphed over death and had been raised in power to the right hand of God—i.e. it is more than likely that the Resurrection and Ascension were originally one and the same. Loisy, the great French critic and one-time Catholic Modernist, argues very convincingly that this conviction first arose in the mind of Simon Peter²—which would explain the claim in Paul's letter, and perhaps in *Mark*, that Jesus appeared first of all to Peter. From Peter, the conviction soon spread to others who had known Jesus, and, being Jews, they inevitably interpreted it in terms of a quasi-physical resurrection. It is not always realized that the tradition of a resurrection *on the third day* does not necessarily reflect a reminiscence of actual chronology. It is much more likely to have arisen as a result of certain alleged Old Testament prophecies.³ It is now one of the generally accepted conclusions of modern criticism that many details were gratuitously introduced into the Gospel tradition merely on the

¹ e.g. B. H. Streeter, Kirsopp Lake and C. J. Cadoux. See the latter's *Case for Evangelical Modernism*, p. 145ff.

² A. Loisy, *Birth of the Christian Religion* (translated L. P. Jacks), p. 103ff.

³ 2 Kings 20⁵; Jonah 1¹⁷—and especially Hos. 6².

basis of Old Testament "proof-texts". It has also been suggested that the reference to the third day almost certainly reflects the contemporary Jewish notion that the spirit of a dead person lingered near the body for three days, and that only during this period was reanimation possible.

The origin of the resurrection claim, then, is best looked for in the simple conviction, *gradually* formed in the mind of the disciples, that Jesus had triumphed over death. It is surely significant that, even on the evidence of *Acts*,¹ they did not proclaim the Resurrection until after Pentecost—seven weeks after the death of Jesus. If the evidence for the Resurrection was as definite as the Gospels allege, it is difficult to see why the Apostles should have required a special divine gift before they were able to speak of this tremendous miracle. The basic fact was the conviction of the disciples which, to begin with, required no evidence. The confused and contradictory stories of an empty tomb and physical appearances grew up later, as a not very convincing attempt, possibly in the face of controversy, to supply evidence for an established claim.

It is sometimes said that if Jesus did not in fact rise from the tomb, it would have been possible for the authorities to confound the Christian claim by the simple expedient of producing the body. But this is to fall into the error of assuming that the facts of the burial were as stated in the Gospels. There is no evidence at all that the story of a burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea, a shadowy and suspect figure in any case, was a part of the original tradition. As Loisy argues, it is more than likely that, as an executed

¹ Acts 2¹.

criminal, Jesus would have been thrown into an unidentifiable common grave.¹ In any case, if the Resurrection was not in fact proclaimed until some time after the death of Jesus, then the question of identifying a body obviously would not have arisen. In conclusion, we may perhaps ask of those who still insist on some sort of literal resurrection, whether they also accept the tradition of a literal ascension. One assumes that none but the most naïve now accepts this fanciful myth—found in any case only in *Luke-Acts* and the spurious ending of *Mark*. Yet from one point of view, the logical corollary of a bodily resurrection is a bodily ascension, for it is surely pertinent to ask what happened to the body.

It may very well be that the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, as interpreted for example by Paul, is by no means as ridiculous as it is sometimes alleged to be. Can we conceive a truly disembodied spirit, with no medium through which it can express itself? But even the resurrection of the body, as Paul realized, does not require an empty tomb. There may very well be spiritual bodies as well as natural.² The Easter faith first sprang from the firm persuasion of the early Christian community that though the body of their Master, like that of John Brown, the redoubtable hero of the American Civil War, might lie a-mouldering in the grave, his soul was marching on.

¹ Loisy, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

² 1 Cor. 15⁴⁴, cf. the whole Section 15³⁵⁻⁵⁷.

butes of deity, such as omnipotence, omniscience and cosmic sovereignty.

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For anyone who adheres to the orthodox conception of the person of Jesus, the problem is obviously a very real one, for the Gospels make it quite clear that mentally, Jesus was a child of his time. He took for granted the existence of demons and evil spirits, and appears to have believed that they were the cause of disease. It also seems that he believed that the world was very shortly coming to an end. If the Gospel records mean anything at all, then he was clearly *not* omniscient. We are specifically told that he grew in knowledge as well as in stature.¹ He frequently asked questions with the obvious desire of obtaining information, and he sometimes displayed surprise at the obtuseness of his hearers. Modern critics have pointed out that he also based an argument on the supposed Davidic authorship of Psalm 110, a psalm which all competent authorities now consider to be a late Maccabean composition.² (Some would no doubt argue that this very fact is a final refutation of the theories of the higher critics!) Nor was Jesus omnipotent. We are told that he could not perform miracles where there was unbelief.³ It is interesting to note that the Gospel writers themselves were apparently aware of the problem to some extent, for the later Gospels tend to tone down the human limitations of Jesus.⁴ This in itself, of course, is a confirmation of the reality of such limitations.

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¹ Luke 2⁵².

² See Mark 12³⁵⁻³⁷.

³ Mark 6⁵ and Matt. 13⁵⁸.

⁴ Note that Matthew changes Mark's "*no mighty work*" (Mark 6⁵) to "*not many mighty works*" (Matt. 13⁵⁸). Compare also

V

THE DOCTRINE OF KENOSIS

As we have seen, the idea of Jesus as God Incarnate is by no means as simple as it is commonly assumed to be. The whole subject of Christology has been the occasion for endless controversy, and the history of Christian doctrine is littered with discarded "heresies" abounding in such obscure titles as Monophysitism, Monarchianism, Theopaschitism and Monothelitism. The controversy has continued right up to the present day, and one of the more interesting by-ways of Christology—the doctrine of Kenosis—has only emerged in comparatively recent times. The word *kenosis* means literally "emptying" and it is taken from the Greek text of the famous passage in Philippians, where Paul, when describing how Jesus took on human form, says that he "*emptied himself*" (2⁷). In essence, the doctrine of Kenosis is an attempt to reconcile the idea of Jesus as God Incarnate with some of the recorded facts of his life. It springs in particular from an increasing awareness of the very real human limitations ascribed to Jesus by the Gospels. In its modern form, it dates only from the 19th Century, and was first propounded by certain Lutheran theologians (notably G. Thomassius, 1802-75) who held that God the Son, when he became man, abandoned and emptied himself of some of the attri-

Jesus then, was not omniscient nor omnipotent. How then could he also have been the Eternal God who is almighty in power and wisdom, and who changes not and can never be taken by surprise? The obvious answer, needless to say, is that he was not—but this, clearly, is not the answer most likely to occur to orthodox Christians. Even the early Christian thinkers, of course, were not unaware of the problem. Some took refuge in the notion that there were two quite separate and unrelated natures in Jesus, and that the limitations belonged solely to the humanity of Jesus. The official Christian view of the dual nature of Jesus as defined at the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451)—perfect God and perfect man—comes perilously near to this, though it is in effect ruled out by the conception of “two natures in one person”. But how two natures can exist in one person has never been satisfactorily explained. The more common way out of the difficulty which the doctrine of Kenosis seeks to solve, is the bland assumption that any ignorance or surprise displayed by Jesus was merely feigned. When Jesus disclaims knowledge of the date of the Last Judgment (Mark 13³²) says Cyril of Alexandria, he “for the profit of his hearers, pretends not to know, in so far as he is man”.¹

This clearly will not do. From the technical point of view, it makes the mistake of denying the reality of

Mark 5^{25 ff} with Matt. 9²⁰⁻²². Matthew omits Jesus' question to the woman. There are many other instances of this. See G. W. Wade's *New Testament History*, p. 176 ff.

¹ Quoted in a discussion of the doctrine of Kenosis in *The Study of Theology* (ed. K. E. Kirk), p. 51 ff. Cyril's view is shared by St. Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas, and Roman Catholics today (and many Anglicans) still insist that there was no real ignorance of any kind in Jesus.

the humanity of Jesus. It would seem, therefore, that, for the orthodox, there is no real alternative, apart from Kenosis, and it has not lacked enthusiastic exponents in modern times. These have included Bishop Frank Weston (1871-1924) and the distinguished Anglo-Catholic social reformer Bishop Charles Gore (1853-1932).

The advantages of Kenosis are said to include the emphasis which it places on the divine sacrifice entailed by the Incarnation, and its recognition that the divine element in the nature of Christ is ethical and spiritual rather than metaphysical. Unfortunately, most of the theologians are still a little uneasy, and there are those who now take refuge in the very difficult conception of a single consciousness working simultaneously on two planes—the human and the divine. An obvious practical difficulty in the idea of Kenosis can be put in the form of a question. If Jesus emptied himself of his divine attributes when he became man, did he himself, in his lifetime, ever know that he was God?

The notion of a God who did not know that he was God seems to be extremely queer—but perhaps not more queer than that of a God who knew he was God but yet lacked all the essential attributes of deity. Some even more formidable problems have occurred to those who have taken their orthodoxy seriously. “What happened,” said William Temple, “to the cosmic functions of the Word during the days of his flesh?” (It must be remembered that orthodox dogma ascribes some very vital functions to the Word, the Second Person in Trinity. He is the instrument of creation and the very existence of the universe depends upon

him.) What did happen then to these functions? F. L. Godet, a 19th Century Swiss theologian, suggested that they were temporarily taken over by God the Father. To an outsider, this seems reasonable enough, but N. P. Williams, a famous Oxford theologian, dismissed it as "mythological and tritheistic".¹

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Here, surely, is the supreme irony. What better description could one have of the whole elaborate edifice of orthodoxy than "mythological and tritheistic"? Dr. Leslie Weatherhead has been recently quoted as saying that he wonders when we shall put religion in the same mental compartment as common sense. If the doctrine of Kenosis will not do, then surely the only alternative is the simple Unitarian conception of an unequivocally human Jesus—a man approved of God, full of the Holy Spirit, who went about doing good.

¹ The quotations and discussion in this paragraph are all taken from *The Study of Theology*. (See p. 52).

VI

IS GOD A PERSON?

THOSE who are dissatisfied with traditional religion, but who are not unsympathetic to the theistic interpretation of the universe, frequently query the idea of a *personal* God. While recognizing the absurdity of atheistic mechanism, they are nevertheless dubious at the suggestion that the power behind the universe should be thought of as a person. To them, the whole idea of God as a HE rather than an IT appears to be nothing more than a naïve anthropomorphism, appropriate perhaps for the nursery or the Sunday School, but hardly likely to commend itself to the intelligent thinker. It was the early Greek philosopher Xenophanes who said that if horses could speak, they would undoubtedly say that the Deity was like a horse, a notion which is paralleled in Rupert Brooke's amusing poem *Heaven*. A similar attitude is also enshrined in the story of the cynic who said: "In the beginning, God created man in his own image—and ever since, man has been returning the compliment". Would it not be better, say the critics, to refrain from personifying God, and to speak only of a Life Force, a Supreme Being, a Power Not Ourselves, an Absolute, or an Ultimate Reality?

Now attractive as these notions sometimes seem, I am persuaded that the attitude they represent is quite

mistaken. It always seems to me that a God who is not a person is not a God at all, and the hypothesis of a mysterious *impersonal* Power or Force behind all things is, I believe, less intelligent than pure atheism. As B. H. Streeter points out in his book *Reality* (and his treatment of the question of personality in God can hardly be bettered) what we want is not less anthropomorphism, but more. "In olden days", he writes, "a crude anthropomorphism was a danger to be feared; in our age what the philosopher wants is the courage to advance further, and to advance more confidently, towards what, abandoning all shamefacedness, I will style the Higher Anthropomorphism".¹

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The case for regarding God as a person is in essence very simple. God, by definition, is the author and ground of the world-process. But what is the most significant event in that process? Undoubtedly the emergence of man, who, by all accounts, whether theistic, atheistic or agnostic, may be legitimately regarded as the consummation of the evolutionary scheme, the only creature in whom evolution is continuing. But man is clearly personal, and it does seem a little ridiculous to suggest that a Supreme Being should produce, through the evolutionary process, that which is qualitatively greater than itself. If man is personal, God also must be personal.

Admittedly, there are difficulties in the idea of God as a person. Some theists consider that it is more helpful to speak of personality *in* God, rather than to think of God as a *person*. But I am not quite sure what this

¹ B. H. Streeter, *Reality*, p. 133-4.

is really intended to convey. Others try to avoid the difficulties by suggesting that we ought to think of God as "supra-personal". This is all right, so long as we really do take it to mean that God is *more* personal than we are. But as Streeter says, "If we refuse to call God personal, and conscientiously use words like 'supra-personal', we are pretty certain to end by thinking of him as *impersonal*. . . . It is better to do a slight violence to language than to impoverish thought; it is preferable to expand the idea of personality rather than to contract our idea of God."¹ Many of the difficulties disappear, I think, if we cease to assume that to say that God is personal implies that God is a person like ourselves, finite, and imperfect. Baron von Hügel, the famous Roman Catholic philosopher, once said that "the obscurity of my life to my pet Pekinese may serve as some indication of the obscurity of the life of Deity to me".² This seems perfectly reasonable—yet the obscurity of my life to my dog does not make me less of a person. On the contrary, it makes me more so. Streeter suggests that we ought to think of a plus element in the personality of God in relation to us, and a minus element of personality in us in relation to God, just as there is a plus element of personality in us as regards a dog, and a minus element in the dog in relation to us.

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It may very well be that we must recognize the existence of an impersonal element as well as a personal element within the nature of God. W. E. Hocking

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

² Quoted A. C. Bouquet, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 67.

says that this is one of the things which Christianity can learn from the religions of the East.¹ But far from solving our problems, I think we only create new difficulties for ourselves, if we turn our backs on the profound insight of the Hebrews, for whom God was always the Living God, a real and concrete Person. In this, as in so much else, Jesus is true to his Hebrew antecedents. No-one could have been more anthropomorphic than he was—but this is a reason for accepting rather than rejecting his teaching. As Streeter so aptly comments, once it is recognized that it is necessary for thought to conceive the power behind the universe as personal, the anthropomorphism of Jesus becomes far more intellectually acceptable than all the rationalized abstractions of our emancipated modern philosophers.²

Perhaps the final confirmation of the truth of the idea of a personal God can only come through the experience of worship. It is through the exercise of that much neglected art—"the practice of the presence of God"—that what the famous Jewish philosopher Martin Buber has called the I-Thou relationship becomes the undeniable reality of confrontation.

¹ See the concluding section of his *Living Religions and a World Faith*.

² *Reality*, p. 142.

VII

SALVATION BY CHARACTER

THE idea of salvation by character has come to be accepted as one of the basic features of the Unitarian creed. But what, in this context, do we mean by salvation?

Most Unitarians, I suppose, if they use the word "salvation" at all, understand by it the attainment of moral and spiritual wholeness, the acquisition of what the psychologist would call an integrated personality. This is obviously a little different from what is normally understood by salvation, which, in a theological context, is usually closely associated with the concepts of redemption and reconciliation, and with the alleged obliteration, through the sacrificial death of Jesus, of that separation between God and man, which is held to be the inevitable consequence of human sin. But perhaps the difference between the Unitarian and orthodox views is not so great as might appear, for it could be argued that spiritual wholeness itself requires a solution to the problem of sin, and presupposes a sense of intimate communion with God.

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The real point at issue between Unitarianism and official Christianity is on the question of the *means* of

salvation. According to orthodoxy, salvation is secured for us in advance, by an almost mechanical supernatural scheme—the mystery of the Atonement—which has only to be accepted to become effective. Unitarians, on the other hand, feel that salvation demands an act of will and constant striving on our part, and that it is a gradual process, rather than a sudden awareness. The late Dr. Alfred Hall once summed up the Unitarian view as follows: “If salvation is to be found in perfection of character, in nearness to God . . . then a life of spiritual endeavour becomes necessary. So the Unitarian makes ‘Salvation by character’ a principle of his faith. His aim is not to save himself *from* God, but to save himself *for* God. The result is that he stresses the necessity for being upright in the business of life, faithful in all human relationships and honest in the statement of personal belief.”¹

Such an attitude is frequently dismissed as Pelagian and atomistic.² In actual fact, neither of these charges can be sustained. In the essay from which I have just quoted, Dr. Hall goes on to point out that a multiplicity of social factors assists us in the process of salvation, not least among which must be accounted the influence of the life and death of Jesus. Nor does the Unitarian view exclude a recognition of the necessity for Divine Grace. In the work of salvation, the initiative is clearly with God. As the familiar hymn puts it:

¹ *Aspects of Modern Unitarianism* (1922), p. 121.

² Pelagianism (named after the early 5th Century Irish monk Pelagius, a staunch opponent of the rigid evangelical doctrines of St. Augustine) is the “heresy” which affirms that man is able to do something about his condition. Orthodoxy insists that he cannot. Atomism is the name given to theories which ignore the fact that we are members one of another.

“And every virtue we possess,
And every victory won,
And every thought of holiness
Are his alone.”

Paul was right when he said: “The excellency of the power is of God and not from ourselves.”¹ But everything clearly turns on the extent of our own response to the Divine Initiative. The process of salvation must be a joint enterprise. Paul, so often thought of as the arch-exponent of the orthodox evangelical view, put the matter in a nutshell when he wrote: “Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure.”² The reference to fear and trembling is significant. The Unitarian view involves heavy responsibilities, which most Christians are unwilling to accept. They prefer to take refuge in the comforting mythology of evangelical doctrine.

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If it be asked whether attainment of perfection is essential for salvation, the answer would seem to be that perfection must be a necessary precondition of *final* salvation. But since perfection is clearly unattainable here on this earth, we must conclude that complete salvation is not possible within the time process. The Unitarian idea of perfection by character, therefore, provides a powerful argument for immortality.

¹ 2 Cor. 4⁷.

² Phil. 2¹²⁻¹³. In a public discussion, I once commended this passage to the attention of an Anglican critic who had suggested that there could be no possible bridge between a religion of enlightenment such as Buddhism or Unitarianism, and a religion of salvation such as Christianity.

We cannot but believe that further opportunities for moral and spiritual development will await us in the life to come. "Out of his belief in 'Salvation by character,'" says Dr. Hall, "grows the conviction of the Unitarian that 'the progress of mankind will be onward and upward for ever'",¹ a useful reminder that a much-derided Unitarian statement can be interpreted in more than one sense.

But for this present life, the key to spiritual wholeness clearly lies in a growth towards perfection, rather than the attainment of perfectness. Perhaps the last word is again with Paul: "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect. . . . Brethren, I count not myself yet to have apprehended: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus".²

¹ Op. cit., p. 123.

² Phil. 3¹²⁻¹⁴.

VIII PREDESTINATION

A CHRISTIAN doctrine which has often occasioned acute controversy in the past is the doctrine of Predestination. Vehemently repudiated by Unitarians in days gone by, it still raises issues which are well worth thinking about. In its extreme form, the doctrine insists that human free-will is an illusion, and that the ultimate destiny of each one of us is predetermined and foreordained by God, without any reference whatsoever to our own individual merit. In the inscrutability of his own eternal purposes, God has decided that some human souls (a comparatively small number according to most authorities) shall be saved—permitted to enjoy the bliss of heaven—and that the rest shall be damned—"sent to hell and punished everlastingly".¹ Whatever we may or may not do with our lives cannot make the slightest difference to this eternal decree dating from the foundation of the world.

There is a sense in which the idea of Predestination has always formed an essential part of Christian teaching. The notion that it belongs only to certain extreme forms of Protestantism—to Calvinism in particular and to the Presbyterian Church in general—is erroneous.

¹ Dr. Johnson's famous answer (spoken "passionately and loudly") to the question "What do you mean by damned?" See Boswell's *Life*, Vol. iv, p. 299.

It is true that Calvin and his followers stand out as enthusiastic supporters of an extreme Predestinarianism—and among them must be included our own spiritual ancestors, the English Presbyterians. (The fact that the Unitarians, the descendants of the Presbyterians, made Predestination one of the chief targets for their criticism, especially in America, must be accounted one of the ironies of theological history.)

But in actual fact, Predestination was inherent in Christian doctrine from the first. The idea is foreshadowed in the Old Testament (in the concept of the "Book of Life" and in the frequent references in *Exodus* to God's hardening Pharaoh's heart—the far-reaching significance of which was not lost on later commentators) and is explicitly presupposed in the New Testament.

Though there are several instances in the teaching of Jesus,¹ the real authority on the subject is Paul, who, in a crucial passage in the *Epistle to the Romans* (8²⁸⁻³⁰) outlines a completely predestinarian scheme. It is true that he speaks only of predestination to glory, but elsewhere he does mention "vessels of wrath" (9²²) destined for destruction. This was a vital issue in later controversy—though from the logical point of view, the fact that God definitely chooses some for glory obviously implies that he also predestines to damnation those whom he ignores.

Paul's scheme was taken up with enthusiasm by St. Augustine (354-430) who emphasized in particular the utter inscrutability of the divine choice. Despite certain initial doubts, Augustine's views were officially adopted by the Church at the Council of Orange in

¹ Matt. 20²³; 22¹⁴. Mark 13²⁰.

A.D. 529. Thus the idea of predestination, more or less on Augustinian lines, became a standard presupposition of mediaeval theology. Controversy continued however. The idea of double predestination—to damnation as well as to glory, implicit in Paul and Augustine and explicitly propounded by the 9th century heretical monk Gottschalk—was for the most part repudiated, and many of the Schoolmen made valiant efforts to reconcile the idea of Predestination with the notion that God nevertheless wills the salvation of all men.

With the Reformation, the idea assumed a new importance.

John Calvin (1509-64) made Predestination the linch-pin of his entire system and pushed everything to its logical conclusion. He insisted that God did *not* will the salvation of all men, and that Christ had died for the Elect only. He was also quite emphatic on the subject of double predestination. Some were predestined to glory. The rest were predestined to damnation, salvation being denied to them from all eternity, not through any fault of their own, but merely as a consequence of a gratuitous whim of the Divine Will.

It is worth noting, however, that even Calvin hedged a little on the question of merit. While he insisted, like Augustine, that Predestination was essentially an inscrutable mystery, he also insisted (again, like Augustine) on its essential justice. His fundamental premise was the total depravity of man. Though the elect therefore were clearly favoured beyond their merit, the rest were only getting their just desert.

But even this was too much for some of Calvin's successors. Hence what is known as the Supralapsarian

and the Sublapsarian controversy. This turned on the question of the precise moment at which the Almighty must be assumed to have drawn up his list. According to the Supralapsarians, God predestined certain individuals to glory and the rest to damnation *before* the Fall of Adam, an event subsequently engineered by himself as an essential part in a predetermined scheme of salvation. This obviously rules out altogether any possibility of individual merit. The Sublapsarians on the other hand maintained that it was only after the Fall that God decided to save certain individuals instead of leaving all mankind to the damnation which they so justly deserved. This milder form of the doctrine ultimately came to prevail—though it is doubtful whether it made much difference in practice. The two standard statements of Calvinistic belief, the declaration of the Synod of Dort (1618–19) and the Westminster Confession (1647), both insist that at least since the Fall, God does not will the salvation of all men, and that Christ died for the elect alone. The one body who took strong exception to this were the Arminians, best represented in this country by the Methodists.

Even after the Reformation, Predestination still remained an essential part of the Roman Catholic no less than the Calvinistic system, and attempts to reconcile the doctrine with the idea of free-will continued. One of the most ingenious was the suggestion first propounded by Luis de Molina (1535–1600) who had argued that God predestined to glory those who, by Divine Foreknowledge, he knew would in fact prove worthy of salvation. The damned likewise were those whose deeds, divinely foreknown to God, would prove them worthy of such a fate. This doctrine, known as

Molinism, or Predestination *post praevisa merita*, has been specially favoured by the Jesuits. It is more clever than convincing.

Nowadays of course, the whole idea of Predestination seems to belong essentially to “old unhappy far-off things, and battles long ago”. It is significant that despite the contemporary recrudescence of Calvinistic ideas, under the influence of the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, there has been but little attempt to revive Predestinarianism, except in the vaguest terms. To this extent, therefore, the protest of our Unitarian forefathers has been fully justified. But though the logic-chopping of the Calvinists now seems merely ridiculous, it is perhaps as well that we should remember that in an age when it was commonly accepted that the fate of the damned would be an eternity of physical torment, the idea of Predestination could be indescribably horrible, something which fully merited the gibe of Theodore Parker, who said that the Calvinists’ God was his Devil.

All the same, the more one thinks about Predestination—especially in an age in which science is constantly underlining the extent to which human freedom is conditioned and limited—the more difficult it becomes to repudiate it entirely. One is bound to acknowledge in the first place that whatever the philosophical difficulties, there is a certain psychological inevitableness about Predestination to anyone who has had a particularly deep religious experience.

Those who have on the one hand, a deep sense of sin, and on the other, a real experience of the Grace of God or of Divine Vocation, obviously find it difficult to believe that their destiny has not been preordained on

some basis other than that of merit. What is more, the whole idea of Divine Providence (which is not necessarily a pathetic fallacy) often comes very close to Predestinarianism. It is difficult to imagine a less Calvinistic soul than the American Unitarian hymn-writer, F. L. Hosmer, but even he could say:—

“I came not hither of my will
Or wisdom of mine own:
That higher power upholds me still
And still must bear me on.”

But perhaps the real kernel of truth in the idea of Predestination lies in the obvious fact of the differing equipment—mental, physical and environmental—with which we all start life. The idea that all men are born equal, just is not true. The fact that someone is born in the 20th and not in the 10th Century, and in a particular social setting in England, and not under entirely different circumstances in Russia or China or Central Africa, is a very real factor in determining what he may or may not make of his life. A very large part of our destiny therefore, *is* predetermined—and for the Christian Theist, this does constitute a problem. Unless we take refuge in the suggestion of the Cambridge theologian, F. R. Tennant, that some aspects of the universe must be accounted inevitable by-products of God's ultimate purpose, rather than the direct expressions of his will,¹ it is difficult to relieve God of some measure of responsibility for that element of predestination to which we are clearly subject.

Possibly the problem is not as great as it appears. We ought not to resent the fact that we are destined to

¹ See page 104 of the present volume.

be different. A universe of perfect, deadening uniformity would completely rule out the possibility of all effective action. It is the very inequalities of life which give us our chance to prove our worth and to share in the purposes of God, becoming messengers of his healing mercy “to the grievances and infirmities of men”. In other words, strange as it may seem, Predestination could be an essential part of the pattern of freedom which, at first, it seems to deny. Perhaps, therefore, the Roman Catholic theologians were entirely right in insisting that our real task is the reconciliation of the fact of Predestination with the equally obvious fact of human freedom.

most of us, orthodox and unorthodox alike, are probably very hazy as to what precisely the idea of the Holy Spirit is intended to convey—which is a very real pity, for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is one of the most exciting and significant of all the official Christian doctrines, and one which ought to be especially dear to the hearts of Unitarians.

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The origin of the idea is to be found in the important Old Testament conception of the Spirit, which appears in many different contexts and at many different levels. The Hebrew word is *ruach*, which, as in some other ancient languages, can also mean “breath” or “wind”. The Hebrews attributed all human skill and excellence to the workings of the Spirit—the strength of Samson and the military prowess of Joshua, no less than the inspiration of the prophets and the wisdom of the wise. In the First Chapter of *Genesis* (which, it should be noted, is probably one of the *latest* passages in the Old Testament) where we read of the Spirit of God brooding above the waters, we have the significant idea of the Spirit as the instrument of creation.

Another aspect of the conception of the Spirit is to be found in the earlier creation-story in *Genesis*, where it is the Spirit or Breath of God which brings man to life (Gen. 2⁷). This notion of the Spirit as the ultimate source of life, in animals no less than in men, appears frequently in the Old Testament, and is magnificently reflected in Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ch. 37). The Spirit also features very prominently in the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. The Anointed One, the Chosen of the Lord, was to derive all

IX

“THE HOLY GHOST—LORD AND GIVER OF LIFE”

A CERTAIN schoolboy is said to have defined Whitsun as a commemoration of the time when the Apostles gave up the ghost. In actual fact of course, it is the precise opposite—a commemoration of the time when the Ghost or Spirit, the Holy Spirit, entered into the Apostles. This event, officially known in the somewhat pedantic language of theology as the illapse of the Spirit, is vividly described in the familiar story in the Second Chapter of *Acts*. It is supposed to have taken place during the festival of Pentecost (the Jewish harvest festival, known as the Feast of Weeks) fifty days after the Passover which coincided with the Crucifixion of Jesus. (The name Pentecost, by which Whitsun is still generally known outside the British Isles, comes from the Greek for fifty.)

Whitsuntide then, the real birthday of the Christian Church, is the festival of the Holy Spirit, a reminder of the fulfilment of the last prophecy of the Risen Christ: “Ye shall receive power when the Holy Ghost is come upon you” (*Acts* 1⁸). But what is the precise significance of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit? In *Acts* Chapter Nineteen, we read of some Ephesian disciples who told Paul that they hadn’t even heard of the Holy Ghost. We may not be quite as ignorant as that, but

his qualities from the Spirit, and it is from the Vulgate (Latin) text of a famous passage in *Isaiah* ("a shoot from the stock of Jesse") that there arose the later Christian conception of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isa. 11²). It was also commonly believed that with the coming of the Messiah, there would be a general extension of the gifts of the Spirit.

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As with all Old Testament ideas, the concept of the Spirit is also basic to the New Testament, particularly in relation to the mission of Jesus. The Spirit descends upon Jesus at his Baptism (Mark. 1¹⁰) and is the source of his power throughout his ministry, being especially manifest in his miracles. Jesus himself seems to have accepted this idea, and it was when certain scribes cast doubts on the source of his miraculous power that he was moved to utter his famous and controversial words about the unforgivable sin—the sin against the Holy Ghost (Mark. 3²⁹).

Luke's Gospel is crammed with references to the Holy Spirit. The author was obviously very attracted to the idea. It is to him that we owe the story of Jesus beginning his ministry with a public reading of a passage from *Isaiah* commencing with the words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Luke. 4¹⁸). Luke even alters a famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount so that it refers specifically to the Holy Spirit. "How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit" (Luke. 11¹³) instead of "give good things" (Matt. 7¹¹).

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A somewhat different conception of the Holy Spirit—the idea of the Comforter (Paraclete)—appears in the Fourth Gospel (Ch. 14) and it is presented as something which belongs essentially to the future. As with much else in *John*, this would seem to reflect a belief of the early Church rather than an authentic element in the teaching of Jesus. The notion of the Spirit as something which was to come seems to have assumed great importance after the death of Jesus, and the Pentecost story in *Acts*, Ch. 2, to which we have already referred, purports to tell how the expected event came to pass.

The descent of the Spirit is here characterized symbolically by wind and fire, and it results in "the gift of tongues"—something which Luke (generally assumed to be the author of *Acts*) wildly misinterprets as an ability to speak foreign languages. In actual fact, the phenomenon referred to is what is known to religious psychologists as "glossolalia"—a kind of wild, ecstatic, unintelligible speech, widely regarded in ancient times as a sign of divine possession. It was not unknown among the Old Testament prophets, and was very common in the early Church. Even Paul was addicted to it—though it is interesting to note that he regarded it as one of the lesser gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 14). Universally interpreted in the early days as a sure sign of the descent of the Holy Ghost, speaking with tongues has continued to be practised by certain Christian sects right up to the present time. Another interesting feature of the Pentecost story in *Acts* is the fact that it is interpreted as the fulfilment of a Messianic prophecy from the *Book of Joel* (Ch. 2).

Like his friend Luke, Paul was obviously most impressed with the concept of the Spirit, which features

very prominently in his theology. A good case can be made out for the view that he in fact identified the Risen Christ with the Spirit, and his notion of the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3¹⁶⁻¹⁷) is interesting.

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It was from this Biblical background that there gradually arose the full Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the Third Person in the Trinity, a distinct entity within the single being of a triune God. Like much else in Christian doctrine, this development took time, and was not achieved without intense controversy. The 4th Century heretics known as the Macedonians denied the full divinity of the Spirit, and the question of the origin of the Holy Spirit was long disputed. In the West, it ultimately came to be held that the Spirit "proceeded" from both the Father and the Son (doctrine of the Filioque or Double Procession) and that, as St. Augustine had argued, the Spirit was the bond of unity between the three elements in the Trinity. But in the East, it was held that the Spirit proceeded from the Father only. This is another doctrinal issue on which the Eastern Orthodox Churches still disagree with the Roman Catholics.

As in so many other departments of official theology, these technicalities seem exasperatingly irrelevant. The more fundamental issues—the precise function of the Spirit, for example—have never been clearly defined. His traditional titles are "Comforter" and "Giver of Life", and he has usually been regarded as the prime source of inspiration and sanctification—though this leads to some awkward difficulties in connexion with

the doctrine of Grace. Properly understood, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, especially when it is disentangled from the obscure complexities of the Trinity, is still of vital significance. In a sense, it is the one basic and essential Unitarian doctrine, and one which renders a large part of Christian dogmatics quite unnecessary. What better explanation could there be of Jesus, for example, than the simple conception of a man full of the Holy Ghost?

The idea of the Holy Spirit is one of those essentially true Hebraic elements in Christianity—a vivid symbol of the tremendous idea of the Living God, the Lord and Giver of Life—the driving-force behind the universe, the Inspirer of men and the source and ground of all supreme values. The distinguished journalist and historian, the late J. A. Spender, once produced a magnificent variation on what he described as the only clause in the Christian creed which he was able to accept. "I believe," he said, "in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life, the Comforter, the Supporter, the Fighter, who refuses to accept defeat and is not cast down by any obstacle or seeming set-back."¹ It would be difficult to imagine a finer or more satisfying creed.

¹ See Spender's book *Between Two Wars*. Quoted in *The Expository Times*, Vol. LVII, No. 11, p. 308.

X

DID JESUS FOUND THE CHURCH?

IN a famous text in the 12th Chapter of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, Jesus is described as "the author and perfecter of our faith".¹ The text provides an interesting instance of how a faulty translation can give a wrong impression. The word "our" does not appear in the original Greek, and it is for this reason that it is printed in italics in our Bibles. The translators of both the Authorized and Revised Versions seem to have felt that its inclusion made the sense clearer, but this is not the case at all. The text should read "the author and perfecter of faith". The writer clearly wished to designate Jesus as the supreme instance of what he understood by faith, namely the courageous acceptance of the call of God, and he was not thinking of Christian belief at all.²

However, the usual form of the text is so well known that we are perhaps justified in taking it as it stands, as an expression of what all who profess and call themselves Christians would presumably accept. The man Jesus, however we interpret him, is clearly the original fountain-head and inspiration of the distinctive religious ideas of Christianity. He is in truth the author and perfecter of *our* faith. But can he also be legitimately regarded as the founder of the *institution* which pre-

¹ Heb. 12².

² Cf. NEB: "Jesus, on whom faith depends from start to finish."

served and transmitted those ideas? Did Jesus himself found the Christian Church? The majority of Christians, of course, would most emphatically affirm that he did found the Church. Catholics in particular, whether of the Roman or Anglican persuasion, are absolutely convinced that he did. The Church for them is not a human institution at all. It is a divine creation, "a wonderful and sacred mystery", established by God himself, in the Person of his Incarnate Son, for the furtherance of his purposes—an extension of the Incarnation, and justly described therefore as the mystical Body of Christ. It is for this very reason that some modern Christians (including some who call themselves Protestants) vehemently repudiate the popular hymn, "Rise up, O men of God". The suggestion that the Church, "her strength unequal to her task", requires the assistance of sinful men to make her great, is dismissed as near-blasphemy.

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But leaving aside such extravagant views, can we really believe that Jesus founded the Church? Do Unitarians accept the claim? By and large, the answer is obviously in the negative. Certainly, it cannot be shown conclusively that he did—any more than it can be shown conclusively that he did not. The whole issue is confused and obscure and fraught with problems—as many non-Unitarian liberals now fully recognize. In the New Testament, the word "Church" (and about the very word there has been endless controversy) only occurs twice on the lips of Jesus—Matt. 16¹⁸, and 18¹⁷. In the latter passage, Jesus speaks of reporting an unrepentant sinner "to the Church". In the former, we

have the famous and exceedingly controversial address to Simon Peter: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church," the text upon which the Roman Church has always based its exclusive and authoritarian claims. The interpretation of the words, however, is open to dispute, since it is possible that "this rock" does not refer to Peter. It could mean Jesus himself, or it could mean Peter's acknowledgment of Jesus as Messiah. In any case, most scholars now believe that the passage is unhistorical, since it does not appear in the Marcan or Lucan versions of the same incident.

It seems reasonable to conclude that both instances of the use of the term Church in *Matthew* reflect the terminology of the early Christian community, rather than the actual words of Jesus. It is obvious from the book of *Acts* that the term soon became the accepted name both for the local Christian fellowship, and for the movement as a whole—which rapidly came to regard itself as a unique and distinctive association, destined to be the inheritor of the divine promises made to Israel. But this was almost certainly something which resulted from the situation as it developed after the death of Jesus, a situation which arose primarily from the Jewish repudiation of the Christian claims. Jesus himself, in his life-time, was first and foremost a Jew, a 1st Century Rabbi of a highly original turn of mind, standing in the line of the Hebrew Prophets. He may or may not have also thought of himself as the long-promised Messiah, but that he envisaged the formation of an entirely new religious movement seems most unlikely. His aim was merely to awaken his fellow Jews to the inner reality and the far-reaching

demands of their ancient faith, in order that they might the better prepare themselves for the coming Reign of God. It is certainly more than likely, as Dr. T. W. Manson¹ and others have shown, that Jesus made ample use of the prophetic conception of the Faithful Remnant, and that he gathered a band of disciples around him to further this ideal. This informal organization became the basis for the Church, which began as an exclusively Jewish community (one of several similar sects, as the Dead Sea Scrolls have emphasized) but which, later, under the influence of Paul, and not without intense inner controversy, took the decisive step of admitting Gentile members, a development which ultimately resulted in such a tremendous influx, that the movement ceased to be regarded as Jewish at all.

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From one point of view therefore, it can be argued that the Christian Church stems directly from Jesus, and that it owes its existence to him. But this hardly makes him the founder of the movement in the usual sense of the term. It is certainly impossible to believe that he deliberately planned an elaborate and continuing organization, for, as Dr. Albert Schweitzer has shown², his outlook was probably dominated far more than is commonly realized by eschatology—i.e. the belief in an imminent and catastrophic end of the world.

It is perhaps worth bearing in mind that, in the last analysis, whether Jesus founded the Church or not is a matter of comparative indifference to Unitarians. If

¹ See his detailed study, *The Teaching of Jesus*.

² See *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

Jesus was God Incarnate, then obviously any plans which he made for the furtherance of his aims are of tremendous significance. If, on the other hand, he was simply the last and greatest of the Hebrew Prophets, his intentions relative to the continuance of his teaching are clearly of some interest, but they certainly provide no basis whatsoever for any exclusive or authoritarian claims on the part of the Church, or any section of it. Nor do they necessarily furnish the ideal pattern for a religious society in the present-day world. In short, the constant strain to prove the historic descent of this or that body from the Apostolic Church, is ridiculous and futile.

In essence, the Christian Church will always remain what it was from the first—a group of people, or several different groups of people, brought together through a common devotion to the person, teaching and example of Jesus, and seeking to promote, through worship, instruction and fellowship, the realization of the ideals for which he stood. Any such group which wishes to regard itself as a branch of the Christian Church, is obviously fully entitled to do so, the only valid test for legitimacy being that which Jesus himself laid down: “By their fruits ye shall know them.”¹

¹ Matt. 7²⁰.

XI

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

A SOMEWHAT neglected but very valuable doctrine of the Christian Church is that contained within the ninth article of the Apostles' Creed, namely the Communion of Saints. Like some other aspects of the official Christian creed, the doctrine is probably widely misunderstood, and it is worth noting that it has, in fact, been interpreted within the Christian Church itself in three quite different senses. It has been taken to imply (1) the fellowship of all Christian souls, whether living or dead; (2) the fellowship of Christians on earth only; (3) the sharing by Christians of holy *things*.¹ But the first interpretation is the normal, traditional one. The Communion of Saints is the name given to the real spiritual fellowship which is held to exist between all believers, whether in this world or the next. The term “saints”, in short, does not refer primarily to those outstanding Christians of the past, officially canonized by the Church. It includes, in this context, all members of the Christian family, all those who, in

¹ This interpretation assumes that the relevant clause in the Apostles' Creed is a mistranslation of the Latin *sanctorum*. The “holy things” envisaged are the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist. The surprising fact that this important aspect of official Christianity is not otherwise mentioned in the Creed, is perhaps a point in favour of this interpretation. But it has never won general acceptance.

Paul's phrase, are "called to be saints", whether gone to rest or still on earth.

The idea of the Communion of Saints is closely linked with the official Christian belief regarding the nature of the Church. It is a reminder that the Church includes those who have faithfully lived and died, as well as those who dwell on earth. In the technical language of orthodoxy, the Communion of Saints is the spiritual union which exists between each and every Christian whether in Heaven (the Church Triumphant), in Purgatory (the Church Expectant), or on earth (the Church Militant). The main emphasis, however, has always been on the relation between the living and the dead, and it is its concern with the souls of the departed that gives the idea its real significance. To believe in the Communion of Saints is to believe (in the familiar words of the *Letter to the Hebrews*) in the "cloud of witnesses" and "the Church of the first-born who are enrolled in Heaven".¹ It involves an affirmation of a true spiritual unity with all those of whatever age or clime, who are citizens of the New Jerusalem, the city of the Living God—a God who, as Jesus reminded us, is a God of the living and not of the dead²—by which he meant, of course, that in God's sight there are no dead.

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From the point of view of critical analysis, the doctrine obviously poses many problems. It clearly raises the whole question of Heaven—and of Purgatory, too, for that matter. It also takes for granted the fact of personal survival. I do not propose to deal with these complex issues here. I merely place on record my

¹ Heb. 12 1 and 23.

² Mark 12 27.

profound conviction that without the belief that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God, Christianity would lose its entire meaning—and as far as I can see, a belief that nothing can separate us from the love of God, is bound to include some notion of personal survival.¹ The importance of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints lies in the answer which it gives to the all-important question of the relationship between those who have passed into God's nearer presence, and ourselves. The doctrine assures us that we can have real fellowship with them and they with us.

This is the official belief of the Christian Church. But I think it would be true to say that the belief has been frequently lost sight of—particularly within Protestantism. The alarming spread of Spiritualism in modern times is the measure of the Church's neglect of the idea of the Communion of Saints. It is true, of course, that there are those within our fellowship who see a deep significance in the claims of Spiritualism, but I find it hard to share their enthusiasm. A brief digression on the subject is not perhaps out of place. I believe that the critical attitude which the Church has always adopted towards Spiritualism (or "Spiritism" as it ought more properly to be called) is entirely justified—for the following reasons: (1) Spiritualism is inextricably bound up with fraud and hocus-pocus. (2) It encourages credulity and irrationalism, and reflects the mentality which believes that spiritual truth requires a supernatural "sign". (3) It fosters the dangerous and misleading assumption that life after death is not very different from life on earth.

¹ For an excellent discussion of this issue, see *The Armour of Saul* by F. H. Cleobury.

(4) It springs from a morbid psychological refusal to face the fact of physical death, and engenders that same unhealthy curiosity regarding the conditions of the future life so roundly condemned by Jesus in his famous reply to the Sadducees.¹ It is sometimes claimed that we should be grateful to Spiritualists for reminding us that reality is not exhausted by normal sense perception. But do they in fact do this? So far as I am aware, the things which happen at Spiritualist seances can only be observed, like everything else, by sense perception. Any validity which the phenomena may or may not have, obviously depends on the interpretation placed upon the phenomena, and the Spiritualist interpretation is not by any means the only one. In any case, have we any right to seek for a verification of spiritual truth, other than the verification of pragmatic empiricism? "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign."²

It is, of course, quite obvious that the human heart has a deep longing for a continuing fellowship with those "gone before us into the world of light". But I am persuaded that this need is best met, not by Spiritualism, but by some such doctrine as the Communion of Saints. Whether we ought to be guided by the yearnings of the heart is another matter. Sceptics and humanists would, no doubt, dismiss the longing as infantile and irrational. Others will believe, with William James, that our inmost feelings are "our deepest organ of communication with the nature of things".³ If it be asked how our fellowship with the departed is to be realized, then the answer is through

¹ Matt. 22 29 ff.

² Matt. 12 39.

³ From the famous essay *The Will to Believe*.

prayer. In the presence of God, we can remember our beloved dead—as they remember us. Admittedly, there are dangers in the notion of the Communion of Saints. It can obviously lead to that invocation of the Saints (in the narrower sense) which is so characteristic of the Roman Catholic Church—and while it can be argued that the encouragement of this practice is yet another indication of the psychological sagacity of the Roman Church, that the cult of the Saints is open to flagrant superstitious abuse, can hardly be denied. I would still insist, however, that there is profound truth in the ancient liturgy which urges us to worship "with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven". The Communion of Saints is a timely reminder that we are all one family before God.

The question of prayers for the dead has always been a source of great controversy within Protestantism, since the practice has been commonly held to imply a belief in Purgatory. But this clearly involves an all too narrow conception of the meaning of prayer. To pray for the dead does not necessarily mean that we wish to deliver them from anything. It is merely a reflection of the conviction that, in the words of a modern poem, "of our human love their souls are fain".¹ There does not seem to me to be anything shocking or impossible in this notion, and I think it is significant that, to judge from our published devotional literature, Unitarians have never had any doubts about the legitimacy of prayer for the dead.

We may, I think, take this matter a little further. If

¹ From some moving lines by W. C. Braithwaite, quoted under the heading "Riding Forth" in the Quaker anthology *Inner Light* (First Series), p. 331.

it is right and proper to pray for the dead, is it too fanciful to believe that the dead also pray for us? If our conception of the life beyond is to be anything more than a vague aspiration, I do not see why we should not assume that the dead remember us before God, as we remember them. It goes without saying that prayer in this sense will clearly not imply intercession on our behalf before a grudging or indifferent God. For them, as for us, prayer will be essentially a striving towards that spiritual communion between all souls, which is made perfect in the presence of him "in whom we live and move and have our being".

Whatever else in the Christian Creed we may reject or modify, I think we should embrace with joy and gratitude the notion of the Communion of Saints.

XII

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

MANY years ago, I heard the late J. H. Weatherall preach an eloquent sermon at Manchester College, Oxford, in which he affirmed his absolute conviction that, one day, the Kingdom of God would come on earth. His serene assurance struck me very forcibly at the time. I had always imagined that I, too, believed that the Kingdom was coming, but as I listened to Weatherall, it became increasingly obvious that for me, the belief had hitherto been little more than a vague background aspiration which I had not taken very seriously. The idea of the Kingdom of God is, I think, a topic about which most of us are a little uneasy nowadays. In spite of the continued prominence of the notion in our devotional literature, it no longer holds the central position in our liberal faith that it once did. In a world of barbarism and anarchy, where human life as we know it may at any time be brought to an end in a holocaust of hydrogen bombs, are we really justified in repeating so glibly the prayer of Jesus, "Thy Kingdom come"?—and what do we mean by the Kingdom anyway?

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It is obvious from even a cursory reading of the New Testament that the idea of the Kingdom was absolutely

central to the teaching of Jesus. The main theme of the preaching of John the Baptist was that the Kingdom was at hand, and when John was arrested, Jesus took over the same message, and proclaimed far and wide the imminence of the Kingdom.¹ Exactly what Jesus meant by this, is, to a certain extent, still the subject of controversy, but the notion ought perhaps to be considered in the first place against its Hebrew background. For the Hebrews, God was primarily the great King—one who was eternally King in heaven, and potentially King of the whole earth. But his Kingship over the earth belonged essentially to the future, to the "Day of the Lord"—a sudden, dramatic consummation, in which the Messiah, the Lord's Anointed, would usher in the Last Judgment and the end of the present age. This is what scholars mean when they speak of eschatology,² and that something of the sort was present in the mind of Jesus when he referred to the coming of the Kingdom, now seems indisputable. The expression "Kingdom of God" ought to be understood, therefore, as implying, not a place or a sphere of influence, but rather the rule or Kingship of God. (The alternative phrase, found in *Matthew*, "the Kingdom of Heaven", is of no special significance. It merely reflects the orthodox Rabbinic outlook of the compiler of the first

¹ For the preaching of John, see *Matt.* 3^{2a}. It is Mark who emphasizes most explicitly the way in which Jesus took over from him (cf. *Mark* 1^{14 and 15}).

² Eschatology means literally "the doctrine of the last things", and is sometimes used to describe the teachings of any particular religious creed on such subjects as death, last judgment, and the life to come. But nowadays, eschatology usually implies a confident expectation of a sudden and catastrophic end of the world.

Gospel. He obviously objected to the use of the word "God" and, following current Jewish practice, substituted for it the normal pious euphemism of "Heaven". The meaning remains precisely the same.)

This background of the idea of the Kingdom in the teaching of Jesus is now generally recognized. The really controversial issue turns on the question of the extent to which Jesus envisaged the establishment of the Kingdom as a cataclysmic external event shortly to be accomplished. Many modern scholars, following the epoch-making lead which Dr. Albert Schweitzer developed in his famous *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, insist that the whole of the teaching of Jesus must be interpreted in terms of what is called "thorough-going eschatology"—and one is bound to admit that there are many passages in the Gospels which support this. (cf. *Mark* 9¹: "Verily I say unto you, There be some here of them that stand by, which shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God come with power"—or the whole of *Mark* 13.)

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On the other hand, there are many other passages which suggest a very different view, passages which stress the ethical demands which the Kingdom will make, and link its coming with the response of the individual. Jesus frequently speaks, for example, of the Kingdom growing secretly and gradually, and of its being found or entered or received. It belongs, he says, to certain individuals (e.g. the humble and the childlike¹) and certain other individuals will be ex-

¹ *Matt.* 5^{3 and 10}. *Mark* 10¹⁵. Cf. *John* 3³⁻⁵.

cluded, or will only enter with great difficulty (e.g. the self-righteous and the rich¹).

All this suggests that Jesus may very well have shared the views of those Rabbis who thought of the Kingdom primarily as a spiritual reality, existing actually or potentially in the hearts of good men. Jesus' commendation of the righteous scribe—"Thou art not far from the Kingdom of God" (Mark 12³⁴)—clearly indicates some such conception. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the famous text, "the Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17²¹) probably does *not* support this interpretation. The passage ought properly to be translated: "the Kingdom of God is in your midst". What Jesus is saying here (or what he is being made to say) is that the eschatological Kingdom will arrive with such dramatic suddenness, that men will find it right in their midst almost before they know where they are. In other words, we are back at the Schweitzerian view once more.

This same passage, however, could also mean that, in the opinion of Jesus, the Kingdom had already come—and this leads us on to yet a third interpretation. It can be argued, with considerable justification, that Jesus believed that the great eschatological event had already taken place, and that the Kingdom itself was an accomplished fact—a present though secret reality. According to one famous passage, his own works of healing were to him the evidence that the Kingdom had come (Matt. 12²⁸). This notion of the Kingdom as a present fact, sometimes known as "realized eschatology", is supported to some extent by the teaching of Paul, and it is chiefly associated at the present time

¹ Matt. 8^{11ff}. Mark 10²³.

with the name of Professor C. H. Dodd.¹ As in the case of Paul, it does not necessarily exclude a belief in some future and even more glorious manifestation of the Kingdom in all its power.

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It seems, therefore, that in endeavouring to discover what Jesus meant by the Kingdom, we are confronted by three different, though to a certain extent, overlapping possibilities—the Kingdom as a future cosmic eschatological event, the Kingdom as a future internal spiritual reality, depending on the response of believers, and the Kingdom as a present and accomplished fact. But whatever may have been the case with Jesus himself, it is quite obvious that his immediate followers were dominated by thorough-going eschatology. For them, the Kingdom of God was an imminent eschatological event—something shortly to be accomplished with power and which would be ushered in by the dramatic return of Jesus himself on the clouds of heaven. That this was the earnest conviction of all the early Christians it is impossible to deny. Already, by the end of the first Century, the fact that the Kingdom had *not* come was causing great embarrassment. As someone once said, the whole of Christian History has been, to a great extent, the living down of eschatology.

The early Christians, then (whatever may have been the case with Jesus himself), envisaged the coming of the Kingdom as a great eschatological event, shortly to be accomplished in a spectacular and dramatic fashion. It would mark, in effect, the end of the world—or, to be more precise, the end of the present age. How far

¹ Cf. his *Parables of the Kingdom*.

the establishment of an *earthly* Kingdom was expected is not always clear. The original Hebrew idea of the Kingdom certainly included the notion of an ideal community on earth—the return of a golden age, a time of peace and prosperity, brotherhood and equity, when every man would sit under his vine and his fig-tree, and the earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord. At first, it was apparently expected that this would take place within the existing order of things, but ultimately there emerged the notion that such a radical transformation would demand new heavens and a new earth. So although the Kingdom was definitely to be on earth, it was held that it would only come after the destruction of the existing physical universe, at the end of the present age. That such an idea was taken over into some sections of Christianity is obvious from the book of *Revelation*. But, by and large, most of the early Christians seem to have envisaged a final end to the existing scheme of things, which means that for them, the Kingdom was essentially a heavenly Kingdom.

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With the continued delay in the expected consummation, this idea gradually became dominant. That the Kingdom was coming was never for one moment doubted, but it was assumed that there had been some miscalculation in the time scale, and that the event was not necessarily imminent. It was connected more and more with the Last Judgment and the end of the world—something which, while possible at any moment in theory, probably belonged to the distant future. In spite of the Lord's Prayer, therefore, the idea of a Kingdom on earth was largely forgotten—except among those minor sects, who, with pathetic fanaticism,

continued to await the imminent Second Coming of Christ, and the establishment, under his rule, of a real earthly Kingdom destined to last for a thousand years.¹ Hence the term millenium as a title for the ideal state of society. This special type of Christian eschatology (officially known as Millenarianism or Chiliasm) has had many enthusiastic advocates, particularly in more recent times (Mormons, Adventists, etc.), and its most prominent present-day representatives are the Jehovah's Witnesses. It is perhaps also worth remembering that official Catholic theology has always followed St. Augustine in identifying the Kingdom on earth with the Church. In a certain sense, therefore, it can be argued that the Kingdom has already come on earth wherever the Church is in control. This belief is reflected, to a certain extent, in the popular hymn, "The day thou gavest"—the real significance of which is often lost.

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But, generally speaking, except among the minority of Adventists and Millenarians, the possibility of an earthly Kingdom was completely ignored. In the 18th and 19th Centuries, however, the emergence of the idea of progress led to a completely new conception of the Kingdom—the idea of a far-off divine event to which the whole creation was moving,² an earthly Utopia which man himself would some day build, with divine assistance. The coping stone of this development was the establishment of the Darwinian hypo-

¹ See Rev. 20. It was a misreading of the references to a thousand years in this chapter, which gave rise to apprehensions of calamitous happenings in the year A.D. 1000.

² Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, final stanza.

thesis, which ultimately led to the triumphant optimism of the Liberal Protestants, who confidently identified their own evolutionary view of the Kingdom with the teaching of Jesus.

This conception, so beloved by our Victorian and Edwardian forbears, and still reflected in many of our hymns, is now generally assumed to have been completely discredited, partly by the eschatological theories of Schweitzer (the one liberal who did not share the liberal view of the Kingdom) and partly by the catastrophic events of the 20th Century. It can certainly be argued, of course, in spite of a considerable amount of evidence to the contrary, that the teaching of Jesus does not correspond in the least to the speculations of Liberal Protestantism. But even this does not necessarily dispose of the Liberal Protestant view, which must be judged solely in terms of the contemporary human situation. Certain circles now dominant in Protestant orthodoxy commonly maintain that the events of the 20th Century have vividly demonstrated the truth of the fact of sin. Since, it is said, man is always a sinner, any hope of achieving perfection within the time process is clearly ridiculous.¹ The idea of the Kingdom, therefore, is an illusion.

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But is this attitude really justified? Obviously the notion of *automatic* progress, onward and upward for ever, is a false one. We all recognize, too, that the confidence of those who were persuaded, at the turn

¹ Cf. R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. It is customary nowadays to dismiss the idea of the Kingdom on earth as Utopian.

of the century, that the Kingdom was just around the corner, was pathetically misplaced. It is also true, of course, that absolute perfection is an ideal impossible of attainment under conditions of space and time. "A man's reach must exceed his grasp—or what's a heaven for?"¹ But I have still to be convinced that any of this makes nonsense of the idea of progress. That there has been progress and development in the history of the universe, it is impossible to deny, and as Sir Julian Huxley has always argued, it is now up to us to take charge of and to extend ever further that cosmic evolutionary process, of which we are privileged to be the unique culmination.² That little or nothing has been achieved so far should not discourage us. Human history, after all, has been ridiculously short. Nor is the idea of progress vitiated by the now very real probability that the human race will destroy itself. Even this does not rule out the possibility of the ultimate emergence, either on this planet, or in some distant corner of the universe, of a new race of beings, truly capable of adapting themselves to their environment, and worthy to be the inheritors of the Kingdom of God. In other words, Tennyson may not have been entirely mistaken when, echoing a profound Jewish insight and anticipating Darwin by some ten years, he saw in man "the herald of a higher race" and glimpsed the "one far-off divine event to which the whole creation moves".

As has often been pointed out, one of the many great Jewish contributions to human thought is the notion of the significance of time—a notion reflected in Communism no less than in Christianity. Perhaps what

¹ Browning, *Andrea del Sarto*.

² Cf. his essay *The Uniqueness of Man*.

the world needs more than anything else at the present time is a reaffirmation, as against the "heresy" of Communism, of the essential truth enshrined in the ancient idea of the Kingdom. In place of the pessimism of T. S. Eliot ("There is only the fight to recover what has been lost and found and lost again") we must substitute the confidence of W. H. Auden:

"Show us
History the operator, the
Organizer, Time the refreshing river!"

In the words of an unorthodox Marxist, Dr. Joseph Needham (to whom I am indebted for the foregoing quotations), "the historical process is the organizer of the City of God, and those who work at its building are (in the ancient language) the ministers of the Most High".¹

¹ J. Needham, *Time the Refreshing River*, p. 15 and 16. The essay in the same book entitled *Science, Religion and Socialism* (p. 42) includes a very original study of the idea of the Kingdom.

XIII

THE FOURTH GOSPEL

DOCTRINAL arguments are often based on the words ascribed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. It is vitally important therefore, that we should be familiar with modern views on the vexed question of the authorship and origin of this controversial and enigmatic Gospel.

According to the tradition of the Church, the Fourth Gospel was written in Ephesus by John the son of Zebedee, the "beloved disciple", several times referred to in the book, and specifically identified as the author in chapter 21, verse 24. This tradition goes back to Irenaeus (end of 2nd Century), who tells us that, in his boyhood, he had heard Polycarp say that he knew John at Ephesus. But except among Roman Catholics, this view is now widely disputed, and it is generally held that the Gospel cannot be the work of John, or indeed of any original disciple or eye-witness.

The reasons for this spring from a frank recognition of the irreconcilable differences between *John* (the term is retained for convenience) and the other three Gospels (generally known as the Synoptics). If, as is commonly assumed, the Synoptic record is broadly correct, then it is obvious that the account of the ministry and teaching of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel must be, at least in part, fictitious—an imaginative idyll conceived in the mind of a later Christian writer. It is of course

true that the historical accuracy of the Synoptic Gospels is widely challenged nowadays, but most scholars still feel that the Synoptic portrait of Jesus is, at any rate, far more plausible. In *John*, Jesus makes the most extravagant claims on behalf of himself, indulges in long doctrinal discourses, repeatedly requires the acceptance of particular beliefs regarding his own divine nature, and frequently resorts to miracle to compel faith.

In the Synoptics there is hardly a trace of this, and the attitude of Jesus throughout is quite different. Now if the Johannine account is historical, it is impossible to imagine how the Synoptic portrait could ever have arisen. But if the Synoptic version is broadly correct, then it is easy to see how the Johannine "myth" arose, for in the early Church, as has often happened within a community looking back to a revered leader, there was a progressive tendency towards an increasingly exalted conception of the status of Jesus.

Most scholars now suspect therefore that the Fourth Gospel is a comparatively late work, and that the verse which identifies the author with the Beloved Disciple (a verse which, in any case, occurs in a chapter widely held to be a later extraneous appendix) is an incorrect editorial conjecture which found its way into the text. It is perhaps worth noting—and this is but one of the many strange features of the Gospel—that the Beloved Disciple himself is never identified with John, though since John is not otherwise mentioned, it is natural to assume that John is intended. But there have been other theories, one of the most fanciful being that the disciple in question was Lazarus—on the grounds that we are told more than once that Jesus loved him.¹

¹ See John 11 3, 5 and 36.

But since it is difficult to believe that Lazarus ever existed, this need not be taken too seriously. The generally accepted view at the present time is that the Fourth Gospel was written at Ephesus, towards the end of the First Century, not by John the son of Zebedee, but by a certain Christian leader known as John the Elder. We know that there was such a person living in Ephesus at this time, and it is significant that the Second and Third *Epistles of John* (commonly associated with Ephesus) are ascribed, in the New Testament itself, to "the Elder". Since it is generally held that all three of the so-called *Epistles of John* (the First is anonymous) are by the same author, and that this author was also responsible for the Fourth Gospel, it seems reasonable to conclude that John the Elder wrote the Gospel. According to this theory, the traditional view simply means that either Irenaeus or Polycarp confused John the Elder with John the son of Zebedee—who, incidentally, may very well have been martyred at a comparatively early date.

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But can we be sure that the Gospel is from the same hand as the Epistles? The identity of language and thought in all four books has led most critics to assume that the Church was at any rate correct in affirming that the Fourth Evangelist was also the author of the Epistles. Indeed, the fact that, in the Gospel, Jesus often uses the language of the Epistles, is one of the reasons for rejecting the authenticity of the words ascribed to him. It is at least possible, however, that the Epistles were merely *modelled* on the Gospel (or vice versa) and the distinguished contemporary critic, Professor C. H.

Dodd, claims to have demonstrated conclusively, on linguistic grounds, that they are not by the same author.¹ This certainly undermines the view that John the Elder wrote the Gospel.

Another consideration of great importance, and one which is frequently overlooked in discussions of the subject, is the attitude which the early Church adopted towards the Fourth Gospel.² Far from being regarded as the supreme charter of orthodoxy, the Gospel was, in fact, very unpopular. Certain sections of the Church were vehemently opposed to it, and its authenticity was not generally accepted until the end of the Second Century.³ Not only does this conflict with the traditional view of its origin, it also undermines the usual critical theory. The whole issue therefore, is, to a certain extent, still under discussion. Some scholars have suggested that the Gospel may very well have originated in Alexandria, a hotbed of early Christian heresy. We certainly do know that it was much used by some of the Alexandrian "deviationists" and that it was accepted by the Christians in Egypt at a much earlier date than it was elsewhere. If we accept this theory, we may perhaps tentatively conclude that the Fourth Gospel was written in Alexandria, round about A.D. 110 by an unknown and probably unorthodox Jewish Christian.

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But whatever the facts of its authorship—and a definite conclusion is clearly impossible—it seems to be

¹ In an article in the *John Rylands Bulletin*, April 1937.

² See *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church*, by J. N. Sanders.

³ This point is noted by B. H. Streeter in *The Four Gospels as well as by J. N. Sanders.*

quite obvious that it was not the work of an eye-witness, and that it is not, and was probably never intended to be, historical. As even the early Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria observed, *John* is the "spiritual" Gospel.¹ It is obviously an imaginative meditation and not a historical study. We are under no obligation, therefore, to accept as authentic any of the utterances which it ascribes to Jesus.

But this is not to imply that the Johannine Christ is worthless. While it is a relief to be able to dispense with some of the more extravagant passages—the egotistical and intolerant claims, for example, which, if historical, would seriously diminish the moral and spiritual stature of Jesus—there are other passages which are full of supreme religious significance, especially if they are regarded as originating primarily in the mind of the Evangelist. Even the extreme Unitarian, Theodore Parker, could still say: "Thou art the Life, thou art the Way"—an obvious echo of a famous Johannine saying.

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It is perhaps worth remembering that the Fourth Gospel will always remain a Gospel of enigmas and contradictions. If much of it supports orthodox Christianity, there are also many other passages which, if taken literally, are daringly heretical. Even the oft-quoted saying, "I and the Father are one"² probably does not mean, in the original Greek, what most Christians think it means, and if the Fourth Gospel

¹ See article on *John* in *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

² John 10³⁰. It is significant that the Greek for "one" is neuter.

makes extreme claims on behalf of Jesus, it also ascribes to all Christian believers a divine status which official Christianity had always denied them. Perhaps it is not surprising that the early Church found the Fourth Gospel disturbingly unorthodox.

XIV

"THOU SHALT LOVE"

THE two Great Commandments—love to God and love to man—so often described among us as constituting the essence of religion, do not seem, on the surface, to present any very intricate theological or philosophical problems. Nevertheless, they do pose certain difficulties, particularly for those who like to think out their religion. For example, it has often been pointed out that there is a certain illogicality in the very form of the Commandments—"Thou shalt love". How can one *love* to order? Normally, we either love or do not love a person. Occasionally, we may learn to love someone whom, at first, we have found unlovable, but when all is said and done, love is essentially a matter of emotion rather than will, and to be told that we *must* love someone, in fulfilment of a moral principle, seems to be a psychological impossibility. What sort of love, then, is envisaged in the second Great Commandment?

There is also a special difficulty in relation to the first Commandment. We have all had some experience of loving other people. We know what is involved, even if we have doubts about loving to order. But how can we love God, who, though we may believe him to be personal, may not be a person in the ordinary sense, and about whose very existence we may have secret doubts?

Some of these difficulties obviously spring from the

word "love" itself. English is normally rich in synonyms, each with a distinctive shade of meaning. But for some strange reason, "love" is made to do service for many different things—sexual desire, infatuation, the parent's concern for his child, the experience of deep friendship—or even mere fondness for a particular type of food or sensuous experience. ("I love Christmas pudding." "I love the feel of the sunshine.") Since most of our theological ideas go back to the New Testament, it is worth noting that in Greek, the original language of the New Testament, there are no less than three words for "love"—*philia* (meaning "dutiful or filial affection"—and often best translated, when the verb is involved, as "to like" or "to be fond of")—*eros* ("passionate emotion", almost always in a sexual context, and not found at all in the New Testament)—and *agape*. The latter is the really distinctive New Testament word. It was rarely used at all before New Testament times, and is not easy to translate. The Authorized Version "charity" (as in Paul's famous rhapsody in 1 Cor. 13) was a good attempt, since at one time, "charity" had a definite meaning, and despite the unfortunate associations which it has now acquired (hence the substitution of "love" in the Revised Version) it is still a useful word when properly understood. *Agape* is essentially a matter of the will rather than the emotions. It means, basically, a determination to show practical concern and sympathy, and is associated with good deeds rather than feelings.

Now in most of the cases where "love" occurs in the New Testament, the original is *agape*—and this is true of the Great Commandments. When we are called

upon to love our neighbour, therefore, we are asked to show *agape* towards him, something which has a definite practical meaning, and which has nothing to do with affection. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour" does not mean that we are necessarily asked to *like* our neighbour. Indeed, it is clearly impossible for us to *like* everyone (and the Commandment is intended to be universal in application). It should always be remembered that Jesus extended the Commandment to include enemies—and no-one can really *like* his enemies. Otherwise, they would cease to be enemies.

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In one of his published sermons, Dr. Leslie Weatherhead has a brilliant paraphrase of the Commandment we are now discussing. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour" means, he says, "Thou shalt adopt towards thy neighbour a sustained determination to show unbreakable goodwill, in order that the best qualities in the person 'loved' may be called forth."¹ He goes on to point out that loving one's neighbour in this sense does not mean overlooking his faults, and he quotes the familiar expression about hating the sin but loving the sinner. One sometimes wonders how far this is really valid. Is it possible to distinguish between a man's essential self and his sinful acts? C. S. Lewis has argued that there is at any rate one person whom we love while hating his sin—namely *ourselves*.² However much we may hate our sinful actions, we still continue to love ourselves. But do we? The common assumption is that we do. The Commandment takes it for

¹ See the collection entitled *The Significance of Silence*, p. 53.

² Quoted L. D. Weatherhead, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

granted (though this is often overlooked). But some psychologists maintain that the trouble with most of us is that we hate ourselves, and that we project this hatred on to others. What we have to learn to do, in other words, is to love and respect ourselves, in order that we may love others.

It is sometimes said that if loving one's neighbour merely means showing goodwill towards him, this falls far short of love. But it obviously depends what one means by love. In any case, real goodwill should never be despised. The latter part of Dr. Weatherhead's paraphrase is important—"To show goodwill in order that the best qualities in the person 'loved' may be called forth." Real goodwill can do precisely this—indeed, it can have a transforming effect on the person showing it, as well as the person on whom it is bestowed. "Loving our neighbour" may not mean liking him—but it does mean acting *as if* we liked him—and if we do, we shall probably discover in the end that we do like him. Christian love—*agape*—could be, in a very real sense, the greatest possible force for good in the world.

When we turn to love for God, the situation is a little more complicated. The word is still *agape*—but in what sense can we show goodwill towards God? In this case, of course, affection cannot be ruled out. Much depends on our attitude to the very difficult philosophical problem of the nature of our knowledge of God. But the mystic presumably feels drawn towards God by real personal affection, affection which grows out of the love which he feels that God shows towards him. The Evangelical too, will always feel a sense of deep personal gratitude towards God, for his saving power revealed in Christ. Even the healthy-

minded and perhaps slightly sceptical liberal apparently feels something akin to affection towards the mysterious Source of all things. Otherwise, why should he sing hymns of praise?

But whatever element of affection there may be in it, the love of God still remains essentially *agape*—a practical activity of the will. It means primarily striving to fulfil God's purposes in the world—to show forth his praise not only with our lips, but in our lives. Dr. Weatherhead has another useful paraphrase, all the more valuable in that it does not exclude affection. Loving God, he says, means "purposefully turning your whole being to the contemplation and study of God's ways with men, that, entering into the joys and delights of his kingdom, you may further his purposes in the world."¹

It should be remembered in conclusion, that, as the New Testament consistently teaches, there is an intimate and inseparable connexion between both of the Great Commandments. There is a sense in which the first Commandment must always come first. We can only love our neighbours in so far as we ourselves are first caught up in the love of God. But in another sense, the love of man is prior to the love of God. As the *First Epistle of John* argues so trenchantly, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, cannot love God whom he hath not seen."² It was because he loved his fellow men that Abou ben Adhem was blessed by the love of God.³ "We cannot know

¹ *The Significance of Silence*, p. 80.

² 1 John 4²⁰.

³ In the famous poem by Leigh Hunt.

whether we love God" says St. Teresa, "although there may be strong reasons for thinking so; but there can be no doubt about whether we love our neighbour or no. Be sure that in proportion as you advance in fraternal charity, you are increasing in the love of God."¹

¹ Quoted *Inner Light* (Second Series), p. 58.

XV

"ARE GOD AND NATURE THEN
AT STRIFE?"

ONE of the most intractable problems which Christian Theism has to face is the problem of physical evil and natural calamity. Any form of evil obviously constitutes a problem for those who believe in a good God, but most people are willing to recognize that moral evils, such as sin and social calamity, are an inevitable consequence of that freedom which is a necessary precondition of the emergence of human personality. The existence of moral evil, therefore, does not necessarily conflict with the notion of a good God. But, on the surface at any rate, the situation is quite different in the case of physical evils such as pain and disease and natural catastrophe. It is for this reason that physical evil is often described as the "hard core" of the problem of evil.¹

There are those, of course, who deny that pain is an evil. This, apparently, was the opinion of Gladstone.² It is certainly true that, from the biological point of view, pain is essentially a prophylactic—a useful warning

¹ This view is sometimes disputed. Professor Leonard Hodgson, for example, has argued that moral and not physical evil is the root problem, on the grounds that while we could contemplate a God who suffered, a God who sinned would be intolerable. (See *Towards a Christian Philosophy*, p. 184.)

² See R. A. Armstrong, *God and the Soul*, p. 116.

signal, without which no highly developed organism can function efficiently. It is also true that some disease results, like moral evil, from an abuse of human freedom. But considerations such as these really carry very little weight, for they obviously account for no more than an infinitely small amount of the world's physical evil. It is quite clear for example, that there is a tremendous amount of disease for which man can in no way be held responsible, and much pain would appear to be completely pointless. One has only to think of the vast, age-long sufferings of the animal creation.

As for natural catastrophe, I cannot do better than quote from a letter which I once received from a puzzled layman.

"Christian teachings [he wrote] stress the importance of the individual and treat him as the unit of salvation, and also stress God's care and love for even the least of his creatures. It is apparent, however, that Nature, which is God in action, has no regard whatsoever for individuals, and no sense of justice. Nature's upheavals, for which man can have no personal responsibility—storms, floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, often described as acts of God—ruthlessly inflict on man suffering and destruction. Humanly speaking, this is neither justice nor love."

This aspect of the problem of evil has no doubt always been apparent. Paul was obviously aware of it when he spoke of the whole creation groaning and travailing.¹ But by and large, it is only in more recent centuries that it has loomed so large in discussions of the subject. It is always worth recalling that the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755, in which 40,000 people

¹ Rom. 8²².

perished, was an important factor in the development of 18th-Century scepticism. The slowness to realize the problems involved in the ruthlessness of nature was probably due in part to the stubborn persistence of fallacious ideas about God. In spite of the Book of Job and the tremendous amount of evidence to the contrary, it was clearly believed for centuries that disaster only befell those who had sinned—or at any rate, those whose fathers had sinned. It is pathetically obvious that even today there are those who subscribe to this disastrous fallacy—witness the popular use of the saying: "What have I done to deserve this?"

Paradoxically enough, the modern awareness of the problem of physical evil has probably been intensified by the general acceptance of the theory of evolution—paradoxically, because evolution was at one time hailed as the theory which could explain away altogether the problem of evil.¹ But as we now realize, the picture of the universe presented by evolutionary science, with its account of a ruthless struggle for existence, extending back for millions of years, is, from one point of view, grim and perplexing.

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It is not perhaps generally realized for example, that according to evolutionary science the great prehistoric reptiles dominated the earth for hundreds of millions of years—for a period infinitely far in excess of that during which there have been human beings on the earth. It may very well be that we exaggerate the strife and the sufferings of the "dragons of the prime

¹ Cf. F. Temple, *The Relations between Religion and Science* (Bampton Lectures 1884), pp. 117-18.

that tare each other in their slime" (to quote a little-known phrase from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*). Professor C. H. Waddington says that the Victorians who tortured themselves with the picture of "Nature, red in tooth and claw" merely used the alleged ruthlessness of nature as a battleground for their own sadism.¹ This may very well be true, but there was certainly *some* suffering in the endless ages of geological time—and there is certainly suffering now. In any case, quite apart from the pain which may or may not have been involved, the endless apparent futility of the whole process in itself constitutes a serious problem. As Tennyson so ably saw, it is not only "Nature, red in tooth and claw" which shrieks against the creed that God is "love indeed and love Creation's final law". There is also the fact of the ruthless carelessness of nature:

"From scarped cliff and quarried stone
She cries 'A thousand types are gone;
I care for nothing, all shall go'."

The whole of *In Memoriam* is a fascinating commentary on the problems of evolution—all the more remarkable in that it was written in 1849, considerably in advance of the general acceptance of the theory. It will be remembered that Tennyson felt compelled to pose the famous question: "Are God and Nature then at strife?"²—and there have certainly been those who have answered in the affirmative.

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¹ Quoted by J. Needham: *Time the Refreshing River*, p. 36.

² *In Memoriam*, section liv. All the previous quotations are from section lv.

According to the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Fall, the whole of creation, and not only man himself, has been alienated from the presence of God by reason of some great primeval calamity, and the evil in nature cannot therefore be regarded as an expression of the will of God. The popular traditional form of the doctrine, of course, affirms that, as a consequence of the Fall, Satan is now in charge of the world, and the evil which it contains must be ascribed to him and not to God. Though it is commonly assumed that the Fall theory has now been abandoned by responsible Christians, it is still occasionally revived in an elaborated philosophical form, and it is by no means without its adherents, nor should it be lightly dismissed. But it is very doubtful whether the Fall theory can ever constitute a really satisfactory answer to the problem of evil. After all, it is always possible to argue that it does not relieve God of the ultimate responsibility for evil—since he presumably permitted the Fall and created a universe capable of falling. The only way out of this dilemma would seem to lie in some form of ultimate dualism—in the belief that there is a power of absolute evil in the universe, against which a good, but not omnipotent God is constantly fighting. Now it must be admitted that this notion is extremely attractive to some minds—however unsatisfactory it may be from the intellectual point of view. But it can hardly be regarded as Christian.

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A somewhat different version of the doctrine consists of the view that God himself is not responsible in any way for the created universe. Marcion (died c. A.D. 160),

one of the first Christian heretics, made a sharp distinction between the Creator God, revealed in the Old Testament, a God whom he called the Demiurge, and the God of Love revealed by Jesus. This same strange notion of the Demiurge, the creator of an essentially evil universe, was one of the foremost doctrines of those influential early Christian deviationists, known as the Gnostics.

It is greatly to the credit of the early Christian Fathers that they did not fall for what, on the surface, appears to be an ingenious and attractive solution to the problem of evil. They insisted, and rightly so, on the identity of the Creator and the God of love, and on the goodness of the natural world. But, it will be objected, how can the existence of physical evil be squared with the idea of a God of Love? It is obviously impossible to give a complete and final answer. We have to recognize that there is an element of mystery in the existence of evil which can never be completely resolved.

Nevertheless, I do believe that there are certain considerations which suggest at any rate a partial solution. As we have already seen, the traditional Fall-Theory of the Christian Church is of no real help, since it does not relieve God of ultimate responsibility for evil, while any form of dualism—the view that there is an evil power in the universe, working against the good—is also intellectually unsatisfactory (since it leaves the whole question of the ultimate origin of the universe unsolved) and quite incompatible with the basic outlook of Christianity. As Canon C. E. Raven argues in his *Creator Spirit*, Christians must be in some sense monists and not dualists—believers, that is, in *one* ultimate

Power in the universe, and one only.¹ The question which we have to decide is whether this Power can be regarded as good. Faced with the facts of physical evil, can we still believe that God is love? I think we can. What we have to do is to consider the end product of the evolutionary process, the unfolding of which by modern science has so greatly intensified our awareness of evil. The end product is clearly man, with his capacity for love and sympathy, his concern about evil, and his appreciation for values. The fact that man himself is troubled about the evil entailed in the process which has given him birth is of supreme significance.

*

The 19th Century agnostic, Thomas Huxley (the original agnostic incidentally, for it was he who coined the term), was one of the first to realize the problems posed by the theory of evolution. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was not filled with optimism when he surveyed the evolutionary scene. He insisted that it was man's duty to repudiate entirely the “gladiatorial” view of existence, epitomized in the Darwinian hypothesis. The “microcosmic atom”, he said (by which he meant man), had found the “illimitable macrocosm”—the universe—guilty.² He apparently failed to realize that this same microcosmic atom was itself the product of the macrocosm. From the Christian standpoint this is fundamental. The fact that man is desperately concerned about the evil in nature is itself

¹ C. E. Raven, *Creator Spirit*, p. 114.

² T. H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics* (Romanes Lecture, 1893), published in *Collected Essays*, Vol. IX, p. 52.

evidence that the evolutionary process which has given him birth is not wholly evil, and once the existence of God is accepted, it seems reasonable to conclude that this same evolutionary process must be an expression of his purpose and his goodness—the means whereby he seeks to realize in finite creatures the values which are an eternal part of his own nature. In other words, Paul may have been even nearer to the truth than he realized when he spoke of creation awaiting, with eager expectation, the revealing of the sons of God. We may legitimately presume, therefore, that the evil entailed in the evolutionary process must be permitted by a good God, either for some unknown reason (this being the view of the late Bishop Barnes)¹ or because an evolutionary process involving as its inevitable by-products such evils as pain and disease and catastrophe is itself a necessary pre-condition of the emergence of free moral agents. This is the view of the Cambridge theologian, Dr. F. R. Tennant, whose learned *Philosophical Theology* contains an exhaustive treatment of the problem of evil from an evolutionary point of view.²

*

There are those who argue, of course, that there is no reason why we should not suppose that moral man has evolved from a non-moral universe. This is the view of many modern humanists such as Sir Julian Huxley, and it is certainly a possibility. But there always seems to be something inherently unsatisfactory and obstinately baffling in the notion of a blind, non-moral universe, the resultant of chance forces, suddenly becoming moral

¹ E. W. Barnes: *Scientific Theory and Religion*, p. 521-2.

² F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, Vol. II, p. 185 ff.

and purposive—or, at any rate, producing a being both moral and purposive. The much more reasonable alternative, surely, is the notion of a moral God, striving by and through the whole process of evolution, to create moral beings akin to himself.

Physical evil then, no less than moral evil, must be thought of as something permitted by God, as a necessary element in the very process by which the sons of God are revealed. This does not mean, of course, that evil is *willed* by God. As Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, that skilful master of vivid illustration, points out in one of his published sermons, there is a distinction between what is permitted and what is willed. When a child is learning to walk, his parents occasionally *allow* him to tumble. But they do not *will* him to fall. If they did, they would push him over.¹

If it be asked how natural catastrophes such as floods and earthquakes can be regarded as necessary elements in the progress of man, the answer would seem to be that these calamities, like the true accident (as when a man, walking along a street, is struck and killed by a falling tile), are best regarded as inevitable consequences of the rule of law in the physical world, without which life would be impossible. If I may quote from Dr. Tennant: “That there could be a determinate evolutionary world of unalloyed comfort, yet adapted by its law-abidingness to the development of rationality and morality, is a proposition the burden of proving which must be allotted to the opponent of theism”.² It is perhaps worth remembering, in conclusion, that the death and destruction involved in natural calamity are

¹ L. D. Weatherhead, *The Significance of Silence*, p. 34.

² *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 201.

not necessarily a problem at all to those who believe in immortality, and who are persuaded, with Paul, that neither tribulation, anguish, life, death, nor any other created thing, shall ever be able to separate us from the love of God.¹

*

It would be foolish to pretend that what I have said constitutes a complete answer to the problem of physical evil. There are clearly many difficulties in the view for which I have been arguing—but, as the great liberal Anglican, Dr. Hastings Rashdall, once said, “The man who declares that he has got a theory of the universe which involves no difficulties is simply a man who does not think”.² It may very well be that there are certain inevitable tensions in life which can never be entirely resolved, and that chief among them will always be the problem of evil. This is the position of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, who definitely believes that, in a certain sense, God and Nature *are* at strife. He has placed it on record that, for him, there can never be any satisfactory explanation of evil.³ We do not find the God of Love in Nature, he says, but know him only from the fact that he first reveals himself to us, in the inmost depths of our hearts, as the Will-to-Love. Here is inevitable tension from which we cannot escape. No explanation can ever provide a complete answer—certainly not the simplest explanation of all, that God is not good. If the ground of the universe is non-moral, then the emergence of goodness becomes no less of a

¹ Rom. 8 38-39.

² *Theory of Good and Evil*, Vol. II, p. 354.

³ See his *My Life and Thought*, p. 277 ff.

problem than the fact of evil to those who believe in the goodness of God. It is often conveniently forgotten that the companion problem to the problem of evil is the problem of good.

As Schweitzer himself has so magnificently demonstrated in his own life, the real answer to the problem of evil is practical and not speculative. If we are troubled by the fact of evil, this in itself is a clear indication that God is love, and as beings created in his image, we cannot but seek by every means in our power to ease the burden of the world's pain, striving to share to the full in the divine task of redemption and reconciliation, and trusting all the while with Tennyson:

“. . . that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete.”

¹ *In Memoriam*, section liii.

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