

Religion in the 21st Century

The present time looks menacing for Christianity. Unquestionably it is losing ground in a double sense: proportionally and in volume of faith. This applies to all sections of it including the Catholic Church. The eccentric notion seems to prevail that the supernatural must conform to the natural as if the latter were superior. If a doctrine cannot be justified on intellectual grounds, it may be put aside. Under this head all the primary Christian doctrines would be regarded as untenable. This would wipe out the traditional Christian Church which is a miraculous institution, a thing of faith.

The Christian Graph Now Descending

The commission of the apostles was that they were to go to the ends of the earth and present the Gospel to every man. The inference contained was that it would in fact be preached over the whole world and that the majority of mankind would accept it. Some of the disciples believed this would be accomplished very soon for they thought the end of the earth to be near. Over a long period of centuries this seemed to be working out. Christianity steadily

advanced. Europe, which constituted the influential centre of the world, became Christian. I think that the statistics, which were based on guesswork for most of the world, declared that at one time forty per cent of it was Christian. At a point this figure began to descend. The official figure for Catholicism today is sixteen per cent. If the graph which has obtained for some time passed be maintained, Catholicism will have shrunk to five per cent by the year 2000 without visible prospect of improvement.

Of course this does not mean that the actual number of Christians is diminishing, but only their proportion to the total population of the world. This has not altered the menace of the position, which is that the supposition that Christianity would eventually absorb most of the world population has not been justified. When the 21st Century dawns, only twenty four years away, the prospect of Christianity as a world-force will be at a low ebb.

The Other Religions to Fare even Worse

But still worse, I would say, would be the prospects of the other formal religions; such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The two latter have no philosophic substance. Hinduism suffers from having too many strange gods; Buddhism has too few – in point of fact none; it is not a Deism. These religions could not withstand the blow-lamp of clever materialistic thought which will be turned on them by the diffusion of education which will be a feature of the century we are considering.

What about Islam, which of late has been the fastest growing religion in the world and which has already twice in history offered a military threat to Europe? I would not be impressed by its religious prospects. It is an amalgam of Judaism, Christianity and local lore. Its holy book, the

Koran, bears no sort of comparison to the New Testament. I have been through it many times and I have found no elevating note in it and not a trace of inspiration. In private conversation individual Moslems will admit as much. Kemal Ataturk, the Turkish leader, said that Islam was a blighting force. I am convinced that the influences which will reign in the 21st Century will prove too much for Islam.

The Jews exhibit the most melancholy picture of all, faith in a personal Messiah and even in God having entered into an almost total eclipse. At the moment they seem to be a supreme anomaly, a people with the mark of destiny still written on them and yet without the slightest hope of achieving it within themselves. As a religious force in the next century they can be written off completely though they will continue to live on.

An up-to-date manifestation has been the zeal shown by the American fringe religions, in particular the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons. Every land is today the scene of their missionary efforts and they are definitely growing. Does the future lie in their hands? I could not possibly think so. They contradict too many of the things which we would expect to find in revealed truth. Their origins were unsatisfactory, in fact sinister. Their originators were below par and, as Augustine Birrell said: 'We like our religious reformers to be saints.' Their doctrines are alien to good sense. For instance their idea of the future life would be perilously near to our idea of Hell. We cannot discern in their adherents what we could truly call a spirituality. It is not possible to make a guess as to their eventual fate. Will they even last into the 21st Century?

The foregoing effort at valuation appears to point to Christianity as the only thinkable exponent of revealed religion in future centuries.

Protestantism in Difficulties

Where in this setting is normal Protestantism to be placed? I would view it with being faced with special difficulties. It began by basing itself upon the Bible as the inspired, unerring word of God. But from roughly the beginning of the 20th Century in general has receded from that position. Moreover the theory of private interpretation by the aid of the Holy Spirit has worked out to fissuring on the widest possible scale, so that every section from Anglicanism to the Jehovah Witnesses is found claiming scriptural authority.

This would seem to present Protestantism to the 21st Century as a philosophy of complete freedom of opinion. This might be thought to have an attraction for the modern mind which resents control and which in particular dislikes what it calls an institutional Church. It contends that rules and regulations hamper the free movement of the spirit. To this I might interpose the comment that the removal of the skeleton from the human body would likewise make it more flexible.

No individual body can claim to represent Protestantism as a whole. In what way therefore will it present itself to the 21st Century? Under what title will it display itself? How will it explain itself and propagate itself and how will a disputed point be decided?

Protestants Unite – at a Price

Protestantism sees all this clearly. In its chief fields it is crying to unite. Here and there sections have come together but only to have fissure occur somewhere else. In the end things remain the same. Furthermore that unity where it was attained would often be at the expense of principle. One example of this would be the formation of the Church of South India.

Now suppose the South India fusion to be secured throughout all Protestantism during the next twenty-four years, so that their Church stands united under the name Christian when the new century opens. What are its doctrines going to be? Remember that it will face the most intellectual, critical, sophisticated, cynical, disillusioned audience that has ever existed. The acid of all that will be poured searingly into every inconsistency and chink.

Surely the lowest common denominator for the recognition of a religion as genuinely Christian would require a belief in the Holy Trinity, the Divinity of Christ and in the Virgin Birth? But is that enough? What about the Resurrection and Ascension? And what of Original Sin, of the Angels, of Hell? For 1,400 years those doctrines were regarded by all as essential Christianity. What proportion of the members of that new united Christian Church is likely to accept them?

Catholicism's Grip on Doctrine

On the other hand, Catholicism apart altogether from any question of its being true, has shown its capacity to preserve its deposit of doctrine. This does not mean that it has always been able to preserve all its members in that belief. There has always been at work since the very first days a process of attrition whereby individuals and even great sections have not accepted the full deposit and have opted out. In earlier days the Church tried to resist this and persecuted in the frantic effort to retain them.

A peculiarity attaching to the present crisis is that the dissidents are holding on like grim death to the Church instead of, as in former times, going forth to form their own division. Today they are determined not to go. Why is this?

But why does the Church continue to harbour those persons who defy it and deny its doctrines? It has always been the practice to argue things out with dissenters and to give them the fullest opportunity to cool down and change their minds. This can be successful, as has been seen with kidnappers. But some day the final act of exclusion has to be proceeded to.

I return to the theme that the Catholic Church has for twenty centuries succeeded in keeping its deposit of doctrine intact. There is no reason to suppose that it will not continue to do so during the 21st Century and after. This would exhibit it as the Rock of the Ages which if for no higher reason than the psychological would make its position unique for those who are attracted by a concrete and unchanging teaching. Scripture refers to the city set upon a hill which all men can see.

A Billion New Members

Actually I am going to suggest that the middle of the 21st Century may swell the Church's ranks to the extent of perhaps a billion new members. This audacious idea harks back to what I have already said about popular education having become general by that time, so that Islam and the Eastern Religions will begin to disintegrate. Unhappily materialism will inherit the greater part of the orphans. I am bold enough to think that Catholicism will get a quarter or a third. Many may think that it is fanciful and even ludicrous to suggest that an exacting religion like Catholicism would thus appeal to whole continents desolated by the fall of their own religions. To show that there is method in my madness I give the following items of recent history. These are of such an unexpected and dynamic character as to be like a

searchlight cast into that obscure future into which we are peering.

Jesus and China

Japan, a traditional enemy of Christianity, found itself in the 1930s threatened by a landslide towards materialism. It set up a Royal Commission with the mandate of saving the country from that fate. After many years of devoted investigation, the commission reported.

First: that the fear was a fact; that soon an alien and distasteful spirit would possess the land.

Second: that the only force which could resist materialism was religion, but that the native religions did not have sufficient substance so that efforts to revive them would be labour lost.

Third: that they had analysed and seen at work every recognised form of religion in the world; and they had finally concluded that of all forms Catholicism had the greatest influence over the mind of man, and that on the whole it was a beneficial influence.

Fourth: it recommended that Catholicism be imposed by law on the people of Japan.

This surprising report was adopted by the government with the exception that legal force must not be used. Catholicism would be named the most favoured religion, to be propagated by all reasonable means.

The first steps towards the implementing of that plan were taken, but the outbreak of war put a stop to it.

Another example: In 1950s the Chinese government, after showing less than no consideration for its native religions, proposed to constitute Catholicism as the Church of China. But excessive caution on their part modified this into a State Church with the Pope at its

head. This was unacceptable to the Catholic authorities and the scheme failed. The Government went ahead with its plan and was boycotted by the Catholics. The State Church has some small degree of diffusion.

I am not suggesting that in either of those instances the government believed in Christianity as a divine revelation. The idea probably went no further than to recognise it as the best ethic. But its establishment as the state religion would give full scope to the Christian teachers to present it in its fullness. In fact, both of those propositions did envisage the papacy and the entire Catholic system.

In my thought I would credit the present enlightened rulers of India as desiring to see their country Christian, though they would not dare to say it at the moment.

Protestant Headmistress Speaks Her Mind

Many years ago, Dr Henrietta White, the Headmistress of Alexandra College was addressing some special gathering in connection with the college. As I heard the account, she stated that the faith of their people was visibly declining and that a crisis was ahead. She recommended as a remedy that they should discuss religion with Roman Catholics and read Catholic spiritual books. She realised that this would result in a number of losses in favour of Catholicism, but she felt that the faith of their own body would be reinforced. This from an acute observer was a compliment to Catholicism.

That crisis point has now arrived. The heads of the Church of Ireland look with fear on the position. They do not think their Church is even going to see the 21st Century.

Of course this could represent a merely local phenomenon. A Church could become extinct in a

country by reason of persecution or other circumstances, such as happened to Christianity anciently in Persia and North Africa, while expanding in other places and being strong in itself. But England does not look forward to any better prospect. Archbishop Ramsay said some years ago that he foresaw the Church of England dividing into two, one half being absorbed into general Protestantism, the other – as he put it – disappearing, by which he meant, I think, amalgamating with Catholicism.

Re-join the Mainstream

My own suggestion which concludes this paper is an echo of that of Henrietta White. Why not abandon the reserve which has kept you away from us, and indulge in a wider extension of the religious exchange of tonight? You have to live with us. Why not try to understand us? We are trying to get in touch with you. You think that we Catholics dislike you. That is not the case. We regard you with affection. We would not wish to hurt you in any way. Part of our motive is the desire to interest you in Catholicism. Is that an offence against you? And after all we represent better than you do the mainstream of the Christian Church. You represent an Anglo-Saxon division of the 16th Century which has had little to do with the mainstream since then. We fear you will dry up in the desert unless you do not flow back.