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# The Unity of Mankind*

BELIEF in the unity of mankind is a very ancient one. From earliest times there have been those who have recognised that men's nature, needs and destiny are alike and demand common expression.

Such a belief is basic to the biblical tradition. Man was made in the image of God, we are told. The early chapters of *Genesis* set out the story of an original and intended harmony, which was broken by human wilfulness and cruelty. Only after the building of the tower of Babel through human arrogance was there the scattering of the human race and the development of separate languages. The message of the Hebrew prophets of the 8th century B.C. was that one day strife and conflict between peoples will be overcome and unity restored by a redemptive act of God. The New Testament is even more emphatic in its view that, whatever their differences, men are of one blood, one stock, all of them children of the same Father and intended for life in community under the Lordship of Christ.

These beliefs, securely rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, passed into the daily outlook and hopes of the Early Church. Christians of the second and third centuries regarded themselves as a " third race ", made up of both Jews and Gentiles, a new people with a universal message, a community destined to overcome the racial and social divisions of the lands into which they moved.

This attitude was reinforced by the Stoic tradition. Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius gave eloquent expression to their belief in the brotherhood of man. They were matched from the Christian side by Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and later by Augustine and the Roman pontiffs. As Bertrand Russell put it: —

> " *Securus judicat orbis terrarum* is a maxim taken over by the Church from the later Stoics; it owes its appeal to the apparent universality of the Roman Empire. Throughout the Middle Ages, after the time of Charlemagne, the Church and the Holy Roman Empire were worldwide in idea, although everybody knew that they were not so in fact. The conception of one human family, one Catholic religion, one universal culture, and one world-wide State, has haunted men's thoughts ever since its approximate realisation by Rome."[1]

When Columbus and the voyagers of the 15th and 16th centuries discovered new lands and continents, the stage became larger, the divine drama an even more impressive and exciting one. Initial reactions to those of different pigmentation and habit were not always favourable. There were sad departures from Christian sympathy and

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brotherhood. But the basic conviction about the unity of mankind was never repudiated. In the 17th century John Locke gave new and authoritative expression to this faith. Men have a common nature and common problems. They have a common calling and a common future to which all must make their contribution.

From the beginning, then, Christianity has claimed to be a universal faith, intended for all men, destined to be presented to all men and by its very nature a unifying influence.

Harnack set out the story of the first three Christian centuries in these terms in his *Mission and Expansion of Christianity* (1902). Nearly two thousand years were surveyed by K. S. Latourette in the seven volumes of his *History of the Expansion of Christianity* (1937-45). Latourette likened the progress of the faith to an advancing tide, the individual waves drawing back only to reach farther up the beach on their return. His verdict on the present century with its wars and revolutions and its numerous repudiations of Christian standards was still a confident one. When he laid down his pen, he said that he felt he was pausing at a semi-colon. The Christian faith is destined, he believed, to enter more deeply and widely into human life and to be a unifying force which leads ultimately to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. In the last volume of his series of books on the 20th century Latourette drew particular attention to the emergence of a "global fellowship embracing both Europeans and non-Europeans" and to the reversal of "the age-long fissiparousness which from the beginning has been a feature of Christianity ".[2]

One other point had been made by Latourette at the end of his earlier work.

"Never had any faith been so rooted among so many peoples as was Christianity in A.D. 1944. It was still in part tied to a particular culture, as had been all other religions, but it was more nearly emancipated from that exclusive association than it or any other religion had ever been."[3]

Harnack and Latourette — and earlier Christian writers — were not blind to the difficulties in the way of a global fellowship. Differences of race, nationality, habit, outlook and social structure have led to constant rivalries and conflicts. These have made unity anywhere of relatively short duration. A world-wide community seems to many little more than an idle dream. These differences and conflicts the Christian has to regard as secondary and passing, the result of geography and climate, of economic deprivation and political immaturity, of ignorance, wilfulness and sin.

For it is possible to present a very different picture of the course of human history. Many are ready to suggest that, so far from being a unifying force, the Christian faith — at least in its institutional expression — has been divisive, increasing the natural human tendensies to separation and conflict. Rousseau thought " the pure Gospel . . . in some way too social, embracing too much of the human race ",[4] and on that and other counts reacted against it. A. J. Toynbee, who

believes that history is a moral drama concerned with the interaction of God and man through the societies which this relationship creates, recognises nationalism as one of the chief divisive forces in the world and regards nationalism as a western disease, for which he holds the Graeco-Roman tradition and the fanaticism of Christianity largely responsible.

Serious doctrinal and ecclesiastical controversies have been prevalent among Christians from the very first. There are clear indications of them in the New Testament. Christian history as a whole has in it many shameful and scandalous pages recording schisms and conflicts. The differences and rivalries of various areas and peoples have been used and accentuated, if not directly caused, in the interests of different parties and creeds. The expansion of the faith has often taken place from motives and by methods which are by no means easy to square with the teaching of Jesus, but which His followers have adopted with little hesitation.

From the time of Constantine the Church for many centuries regarded itself as the visible form of the *civitas Dei* on earth. The idea of the *corpus christianum* meant the unification of political, social and cultural life. The end justified the means by which its authority and influence were extended. J. Thayer Addison in *The Medieval Missionary* (1936) gives some illuminating details of this. As J. Van Den Berg has written: —

> " In the conversion of the Germanic tribes as much as in the Crusades, secular and religious imperialism went hand in hand, and medieval monasticism was as active in the spread of culture as in the propagation of Christianity."[5]

When we come nearer our own day, we cannot ignore the fact that when those coming from nominally Christian nations discovered new lands, their inhabitants were often regarded and treated brutally and as sub-human. Initially Christians felt no difficulty in participating in the slave-trade. Slavery was maintained and defended by certain Christian Churches until the second half of the 19th century. The trade and the system have left a tragic legacy. The ancient and rich cultures of Asia were frequently treated with contempt by those who regarded themselves as the representatives of the Christian Gospel and Christian civilisation. The expansion of the faith during what Latourette describes as " The Great Century " was clearly partly a consequence of the contemporary political, economic and cultural expansion of Western Europe. This has contributed to some of the deepest and most dangerous of the tensions of the 20th century. Moreover, different Christian traditions have competed with each other, " exporting duplicate versions of their own particular type of Christianity "[6] and thereby further dividing communities once united in their beliefs and worship.

However, by whatever means the faith has spread to every corner of the world it has shown itself more universal in appeal than any other religion. Christians now face a new situation.

The era of western political expansion and colonialism is over. There is reaction against the western culture which spread together with the Christian faith. The religions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam have revived. Their revival is in most instances associated with nationalisms, which Toynbee and others see as a direct or indirect product of developments in post-Reformation Europe. The rapid increase in world population means that the " minority quality " of Christianity is being intensified, quite apart from the loosening of its hold over parts of the world where it was formerly authoritatively entrenched. At the same time there has spread from Russia to parts of Asia and Africa an ideology and a social system, which are atheistic and materialistic and which make their own claim to universal truth and applicability.

In the political sphere of recent decades two great power blocks have confronted one another, uneasily seeking security in their nuclear weapons. The one is based in the United States and Western Europe, the other consists of the Soviet Union and a number of satellite nations. An independent " Third World ", slowly developing economic strength, but not at ease within itself, has been eyeing both of these power blocks with a mixture of wistfulness and distrust. Now there moves on to the international stage China with its vast potential for good or ill.

Amid all these perplexing and dangerous uncertainties the unity of mankind is being steadily promoted by technology. Speedy travel and communication by a variety of new media link together different peoples and nations and speed their economic progress. A more uniform pattern of life is emerging, though not an immediate unity of spirit. Slowly, however, the world becomes an " intelligible unit of historical study ", to use one of Toynbee's phrases. Consciousness of this is likely to be increased with the further exploration of distant planets and outer space. Though still divided by racialism, by differing stages of development, by nuclear armaments, by revolutionary ideologies — and by religion — mankind becomes more aware of its unity and of its common needs. In spite of outward diversities, men and women everywhere feel the truth of the claim made by the Levellers in 17th century England: "None comes into the world with a saddle on his back, neither any booted or spurred to ride him."[7] Certain basic human rights are claimed for all.

When the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches met in Bristol, England, in 1969, it had before it a report entitled " God in Nature and History ". This was the product of discussions between theologians, natural scientists and historians. In it these sentences occur: —

" The universalising and unifying of history started in the age of mission and colonialism, and is now in this generation penetrating human minds everywhere as never before. This last fact is not so much due to the impact of the Gospel as to the tech-

nological revolution, which in itself has a universal tendency. These different sources of universal history cannot, however, be separated, because . . . the advance of technological science and practice cannot be understood apart from the influence of the Gospel."[8]

This last point was discussed at length by Dr. Van Leeuwen in *Christianity in World History* (1964). The rise of technocracy is, in his view, " an historical phenomenon thrown up by Christian civilization itself — a recent phase in the continuous process of structural modification which Christianity has undergone in the course of its history, particularly in the West."[9] A technological era has inescapably replaced the old *corpus christianum*. The task of the Church is, according to Van Leeuwen, to make the voice of Christ heard within it. To make a common front with other religions against modern secularism and atheistic materialism would, in his view, be a fatal mistake. Van Leeuwen's thinking was clearly influenced by that of Hendrik Kraemer, the distinguished director of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey. But in *World Cultures and World Religions* (1960) Kraemer pointed out that the increasing contact of East and West will often " wear the aspect of a counter-agency to the world mission of Christianity."[10]

The theme of a coming world civilization and the unification of mankind in one single society occupied much of the attention of W. E. Hocking (1874-1966), one-time Professor of Philosophy at Harvard. As chairman of the American Laymen's Committee of Appraisal, whose report *Re-Thinking Missions* (1932) attracted at the time a good deal of hostile criticism, Hocking took the view that " the relation between religions must take increasingly hereafter the form of a common search for truth " and " the time has come to set the educational and other philanthropic aspects of mission work free from organised responsibility to the work of conscious and direct evangelisation".[11]

A quarter of a century later, this view of the right relations between the great religions of the world was elaborated by Hocking in *The Coming World Civilization* (1958). Similar views have been expressed by A. J. Toynbee. Both Hocking and Toynbee are deeply religious men convinced that a unification of mankind in terms of Marxist Communism could only be tyrannous and would fail to meet men's deepest needs. By religion Toynbee understands " the overcoming of self-centredness, in both individuals and communities, by getting into communion with the spiritual presence behind the universe and by bringing our wills into harmony with it ".[12] He regards Christianity as the highest of the " higher religions " and in essence unique. But, like Hocking, he attacks Christianity's frequent tendency to arrogance and intolerance and its record of internal divisiveness and strife.

Christians are growingly aware that this indictment has much truth in it. Kraemer ended *World Cultures and World Religions* with the plea that the Christian Church " should first and foremost set her

own house in order, because the greatest service she can render to the world, the Western and the Eastern world, is by being resolutely the Church of Jesus Christ ".[13] This is the basic aim of the Ecumenical Movement, which has been succinctly defined by James Hastings Nicholls as " a movement toward the Lord of the Church, in whom alone is the Church's unity and catholicity ".[14] What progress can be claimed?

The stages by which the major missionary societies began to develop a common strategy and established united institutions are well known; then, those by which the various agencies and individuals concerned with the application of the faith to modern society drew together; next the steps which led theologians of various traditions into discussions, entered into hesitantly, but resulting in greater mutual confidence and also greater humility; and, finally, the decision to form a World Council of Churches.

When it was set up in 1948, the World Council of Churches consisted of one hundred and forty-four Churches. The member units now number nearly two hundred and fifty. and the range is far greater both geographically and doctrinally. Beside the main post-Reformation Churches and those that are the result of their missionary efforts in Asia and Africa, the Council includes all the ancient Orthodox Churches, a number of Pentecostal Churches and the first of the hundreds of Independent African Churches. Since the second Vatican Council the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church has changed. No one would yet care to prophesy if or when the Roman Church will join the World Council. But cooperation at many levels and through many agencies gives the world Christian community as a whole a greater sense of mutual belonging and a greater opportunity of contributing to the uniting of all peoples.

The Commission of the Churches for International Affairs, which was established jointly in 1937 by the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches, then in process of formation, has played an important part in keeping the Churches informed about divisive international issues. It has provided a forum for their examination and discussion. The Commission has also brought a united Christian influence to bear in a number of areas of conflict and in the corridors of the United Nations.

Reinhold Niebuhr used to point out how " the balance of power ", in which liberal statesmen of the 19th century believed, had to give place to " collective security "; and how the failure of the League of Nations and the difficulties encountered by the United Nations make it impossible to be optimistic about the speedy establishment of a world community.

> " Perhaps we are fated, for some centuries at least, to live in a situation in which the global community appears to be a necessity because of the interdependence of nations, but an impossibility because there are not enough forces of cohesion in the global community."[15]

It is as a growing force of cohesion in the world that Christians have their role. They will only fulfil it by loyalty to the Gospel, by a willingness to sacrifice and suffer for their beliefs, and by sitting more lightly to inherited cultural patterns and to familiar ecclesiastical structures. World confessionalism may perpetuate "the wrongs of history", rather than redeem them, as Bishop Bengt Sundkler has pointed out.[16] The uniting of individual Churches is a small but necessary part of what is required and in practice this has proved extraordinarily difficult, save in the Third World. At the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968, with the problem of racialism particularly in mind, James Baldwin declared: "The destruction of the Christian Church as it is presently constituted may not only be desirable, but necessary."[17]

In spite of the caveats of Kraemer and Van Leeuwen there has been growing recognition of the need for "dialogue" with men of other faiths, both those adhering to the ancient historic religions and those who have adopted the new secular "religions" of Humanism and Communism. Somewhat hesitant beginnings have been made. As Kenneth Cragg told the bishops of the Anglican Communion, when they met at Lambeth in 1968: "The alternative is not between dialogue and witness but between dialogue and soliloquy."[18] The Commission of World Mission and Evangelism has for some years promoted scholarly and sympathetic study of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Since the Fourth Assembly "Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths" has become a major concern of the World Council of Churches itself. It occupied the close attention of the Central Committee when it met in Addis Ababa in January 1971.[19]

Fruitful Marxist-Christian discussions have not proved easy to arrange, particularly since the invasion of Czecho-Slovakia in 1968 and the internal troubles which have come upon the World Peace Council, which the late Josef Hromadka founded. But they must be undertaken. It should be noted that the anti-religious policy of the Kremlin has brought a "comradeship in suffering" between Christians, Moslems and other believers in God in many parts of the Soviet Union. In years to come this may have interesting and important results in removing some of the suspicion and hostility, which have often separated religious communities.

One other feature of the modern world deserves attention. Movements of population and large scale emigration from Asia, Africa and the West Indies into Western Europe have taken place. In most cases they have been caused by the hope of more remunerative employment. A number of countries are becoming multi-racial to a greater extent than ever before and also pluralistic in religion. This presents Christians with new challenges and new opportunities. It comes at a time when racial tension has increased in many parts of the world and when attempts at segregation and enforced separate development of races are taking place in some countries. In South Africa such a policy has the support of some Christians. In the United

States the cultural integration of Black and White, which has long been encouraged, is under challenge in certain quarters.

These developments led the World Council of Churches to launch in 1969 a Programme to Combat Racism and the Faith and Order Commission at its meeting in Louvain in 1971 to turn aside from the customary discussion of theological and ecclesiastical differences to consider the theme, " The Unity of the Churches and the Unity of Mankind ".

The critical reactions which these steps have caused in some places show that the way forward to a just and peaceful world community will still be long and difficult. But to it Christians are committed by their faith in Jesus Christ as " the New Man who leads the process of history to its ultimate goal ". They must act corporately. They must act individually. It is by the witness of individuals that prejudice is overcome and the ideal of a united mankind brought nearer.


NOTES

[1] *History of Western Philosophy*, 1946, p. 305.

[2] *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*, Vol. V, 1962, pp. 526, 531.

[3] *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. VII, 1945, p. 494.

[4] " First Letter from the Mountain ". Quoted by Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nations and Empires*, 1960, p. 185.

[5] *Constrained by Jesus' Love: An Inquiry into the Motive of the Missionary Awakening in Great Britain between 1698 and 1815*, Kampen, 1956, p. 167.

[6] A. Th. Van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History*, 1964, p. 422.

[7] See H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, 1961, p. 624.

[8] *New Directions in Faith and Order*, Faith and Order Paper, No. 55, 1968, p. 25.

[9] *Christianity in World History*, 1964, p. 408.

[10] *World Cultures and World Religions*, 1960. p. 376.

[11] *Re-Thinking Missions*, 1932, pp. 47 and 70.

[12] *Surviving the Future*, 1971.

[13] *op. cit.*, p. 376.

[14] *Church History*, September 1954, p. 275.

[15] *Nations and Empires*, 1960, p. 266. Cp. *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, 1943, p. 268: " No possible refinement of social forces and political harmonies can eliminate the potential contradiction to brotherhood which is implicit in the two political instruments of brotherhood — the organisation of power and the balance of power."

[16] See *The Church Crossing Frontiers: Essays on the Nature of Mission in Honour of Bengt Sundkler*, 1969, p. 211.

[17] See *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XX, No. 4, October 1968, p. 372.

[18] " Dialogue with Other Faiths ", *Lambeth Conference 1968: Preparatory Essays*, 1968, p. 40.

[19] See *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, April 1971, pp. 118ff.

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