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CHRISTIANITY AND CIVILISATION

THE development and diffusion of modern civilisation must ever remain as one of the wonders of universal history, comparable to the conquests of Alexander the Great, or the Reformation. That is a large claim to make and yet there seem to be good reasons for adhering to it. We are so close to this trend of human affairs, and so accustomed to it that we hardly appreciate how momentous it is. To take one illustration, Macaulay was right when he argued that transport is the mainspring of material progress. When men and things can be moved easily and quickly and cheaply from place to place and from land to land the standard of living inevitably rises. In illustration it may be remarked that the rise and fall in the price of sulphuric acid serves as a barometer of trade, the reason being that it is required in the manufacture of so many and varied commodities. In the same fashion, the standard of civilisation may be measured with considerable accuracy by the ease and efficiency of transport. Thus the motor has produced some remarkable changes in the lives of those dwelling in rural areas, not only in Great Britain, but in India, and China, and South America. When the improvements in transport are considered, it will be seen at once that the headway made by civilisation is amazing, if considered over a century, or even a decade. The end is not yet by any manner of means unless some wholly unusual and unexpected interference with the course of human life should take place. On the contrary, the increasing pace of modern material progress makes any attempt to prophesy to look exceedingly foolish.

Christianity must find its place under these conditions. Its chiefest glory is that it claims to permeate and control every aspect of man's life, not only from an individual standpoint, but from the national and international as well. But when we turn to survey the actual facts of the case, a somewhat perplexing spectacle greets our eyes. Dividing the human race into two great sections according as they give allegiance of any kind, no matter how nominal and superficial, to the name of Christ,

and those who overtly repudiate His claims to be very God of very God, we find that the so-called Christian world is not distinguished by its piety, even of the most formal type. If church-going be any adequate criterion, it may be called to mind that, as far as Great Britain is concerned, the percentage of the population which regularly attends a place of worship is said not to exceed one-tenth. Conditions in the United States of America and the Dominions may be rather better but, even there, symptoms are growingly manifest which prove that Christianity may be said to be doing little more than holding its ground at present. As for the situation in Europe, it surely speaks for itself. These are great and mighty nations which seem for a season to have resiled from any connection with Christianity. Atheism and agnosticism seem to be in the ascendant where they do not find themselves overshadowed by the crudest racialism which seeks to supplant the place which belongs to Christ and to Him alone by the deification of nationalism.

As for the heathen world, it is remarkable that, while Christian civilisation spreads like a prairie fire, Christianity itself is not welcomed on any large scale. Here is an eloquent example. While the aggregate number of Christians in India is very gratifying, it represents but a tiny percentage of the population. Indeed it is doubtful if the proportion of Christians is as large, relative to the speed and scale with which the population increases, as it was at the beginning of the present century. If the Christian faith had made headway as rapidly as the material conveniences which have followed in the train of the gospel, all things in that mighty sub-continent would bid fair to become new. In appearance a different story may require to be told regarding other parts of the non-Christian world, but substantially the conditions are very much alike. The problem is complicated by the fact that the spread of Christian civilisation is not in appearance aiding in the advance of Christianity but rather retarding it. Old beliefs and customs and restraints are being dissolved and destroyed by the impact of modern civilisation, especially in Africa, and it is stated that the result is a growing aversion to the acceptance of the Christian faith, or an increasing difficulty in so doing. It is always easier to induce a man who believes in a divinity of some description to become a Christian than one who says in his heart that there is no

God. The rapid diffusion of Christian civilisation cannot be described for the present as the preparation of a highway in the desert for the one, true God, as far either as the Christian or pagan areas of the globe are concerned.

Critics of Christianity have not been slow to suggest that it is doomed to disappear on that account. They would have us believe that religion of any kind is the opiate of the poor, and that with the advance of comfort and convenience amongst all classes religion's function as a form of escapism will become superfluous. There is a certain amount of truth in these contentions, as the words of our Lord remind us: "Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matt. xix. 23-24). The inference from these words is as plain as a pikestaff. The increase of material wealth is not conducive to faith. Our Lord does not say for a moment that the two are incompatible. On the contrary, His ideal was that material riches should go hand in hand with spiritual riches. Men should be rich in righteousness because they have purchased of Him gold tried in the fire. But His warning is clear and plain that increasing ease and comfort, the results of increasing goods, make it harder for men to seek rest for their souls in Himself. To go the length, however, of declaring that Christianity will be extinguished has no warrant whatever, either in revelation, reason, or experience, as this paper will help to show. Before passing to substantiate that claim, it may be worth while to pause and remember that Christianity is now being tested by prosperity. It has often been subjected to adversity, and it has emerged again and again more than conqueror through the grace and power of its Divine Founder. But now it is being exposed to the perils not of storm but of sunshine, in days when men do not attack the Christian faith as an evil thing but explain it away. The true believer does not tremble for the ark of God. He knows full well that, while it may rock, and reel, it cannot fall to the ground. But there is no faith so sure and strong that it can dispense with further reinforcement.

Thus it is both reassuring and reviving to remember that the Gospel was first preached in an age, and in a part of the world, where a very remarkable degree of culture and civilisation

obtained. It was originally proclaimed within the far-flung frontiers of the Roman Empire, and in parts where the law and order, and amenities which never fail to spring out of them, had taken fairly deep root. Ephesus and Antioch which are mentioned so frequently in the New Testament were the second and third cities respectively of the Roman Empire; and we need not go beyond the information which may be obtained from the Acts of the Apostles with regard to them to form a general but correct notion of the standard of life which characterised them. Thus the large number of silversmiths in Ephesus seems to point to considerable wealth, while the statement that Paul lectured daily in the building, called the school of Tyrannus, surely proves that religious disputation of the kind in which the great Apostle might be expected to engage was exceedingly popular.

“ Paul seems to have worked at his trade from sunrise till eleven o'clock in the forenoon. At the latter hour business in the Asiatic cities seems to have ceased, and thus the building known as ‘ the school of Tyrannus ’ (Acts xix. 9) would be at liberty. ‘ Here the Apostle ’, as one New Testament MS. informs us, ‘ was in the habit of lecturing and discussing until four o'clock in the afternoon ’ ” (G. Currie Martin, *Ephesians*, p. 15).

The contents of the sublime epistle which Paul addressed to the Christian community of that metropolis would in itself furnish ample evidence in support of my contention that the ancient world in which Christ was first preached as the Saviour of the human race was very far indeed from being in a backward or barbarous condition, judged by the standards appropriate for a period separated by two thousand years from the present hour.

Civilisation then offered no obstacle to the spread of the Gospel. It is true that modern civilisation is of a very different kind, and yet, in essence, it may not be found to differ very much from that of the classical world. It is but a means to an end which is the more perfect adjustment of man's body and mind to its environment. That was done in one way by the culture and civilisation of the first century, and it is attempted in a different way in the twentieth. But although the paths are so different, the goal is the same. Whether our present-day civilisation makes us much happier than did that of the apostolic age the men of that day is a hard question to answer. I am, of course, taking no account of all the abuses and excrescences like slavery which defiled and disfigured the civilisation which

the New Testament writers knew so well, but only of the main lines on which it was organised. I am thus endeavouring to lead to the conclusion that the diffusion of civilisation is not necessarily inimical to the preaching and propagation of Christianity.

Indeed, a good case might be made out for the argument that the extension of our Lord's authority over the hearts and consciences of men is facilitated by culture and civilisation. That was true of New Testament times. It would have been an impossibility for the Gospel to have triumphed as it did a century before it was first proclaimed. The time was not ripe. Another hundred years was required that a generation able to understand and appreciate the New Testament Epistles should arise. Before that day the strong meat of the Gospel would have been as useless as if it were offered to babes in place of milk. There could have been no New Testament, humanly speaking, unless conditions and circumstances had come into being which made its composition in the power and demonstration of the Holy Ghost a great possibility.

The same thing happened at the Reformation. It synchronised with the Renaissance in Europe, if the latter did not actually precede it in point of time, and it owed a tremendous debt to it. Thus Erasmus was profoundly affected by the Revival of Learning as the Renaissance is also called. Of him it has been facetiously said that he laid the egg which Luther hatched. The case of Patrick Hamilton, the first Scottish martyr of the Reformation, was doubtless typical of many. He studied in the University of Paris where Erasmus had also worked. "It was through Erasmus that Hamilton made his approach to Luther, and it was by the spirit of the Renaissance that he was prepared for the doctrines of the Reformation" (J. A. Duke, *History of the Church of Scotland*, p. 140). It would be a mistake to say that there would be no Reformation without the Renaissance; but it would be equally a mistake to say that the Reformation could have altered the course of the world's history without the parallel movement.

Something similar may be said of the second half of the nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution undoubtedly did a great deal to benefit the masses from a material point of view. It was soon followed by a wave of great prosperity for our nation, and yet it was during these decades that the emergence of several remarkable figures in the religious life of our

land took place. These were the days of Spurgeon, and William Booth, and Hudson Taylor, and Moody and Sankey, to mention only those who made such a deep impression on evangelical piety. These observations may require a good deal of modification before they can truly be said to reflect all the facts of the case but in the main they are true, and they may be cited in support of the proposition that the Gospel can have free course and be glorified in times of prosperity and material progress as well as in those when men are driven back upon God by the exceeding greatness of their need.

It would, of course, be folly to contend that civilisation can always be regarded as a *praeparatio evangelica* although that does happen from time to time. As we read the prophetic books of the Old Testament, we find again and again passages in which the growing luxury of the days, in which their writers ministered, is denounced as creating a false sense of security and independence of God.

“Ye that put far away the evil day, and cause the seat of violence to come near: that lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches; and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; that sing idle songs to the sound of the viol; that devise for themselves instruments of music like David; that drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments; but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph” (Amos vi. 3-6, R.V.).

In the same strain one recalls the famous words of Bishop Butler in the Advertisement, prefixed to the first edition of his *Analogy* (1736).

“It is come, I know not how, to be taken for granted, by many persons, that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry; but that it is, now at length, discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it, as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment; and nothing remained, but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals, for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world.”

Laodicean Christianity was characterised in Revelation as rich and increased with goods and needing nothing. Civilisation cannot be said to be everywhere and always a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ. But there are undoubtedly times and seasons when it creates conditions in which the Word of God can go from strength to strength.

But there is another side to the picture. The civilisation with which we are familiar is the creation of Christianity, and, if the claim can be made without offence or arrogance, of Pro-

testant Christianity. All the great religions of the world may have been said to have produced a certain type of civilisation. China owes a great debt to Confucius in all kinds of ways. Islam brings in its train a certain framework of civilisation. Ancient Egypt and India have left extensive and eloquent relics of their civilisations, and the same is true of Rome and Greece, Assyria and Babylon. But these are surely unworthy to be compared with the beneficial changes which Christianity has made. Comparisons may not be very easy if they are going to be fair and just but a common denominator may be found in medical science. The human body has not altered appreciably for countless centuries, and its ailments do not vary very much. Toothache is probably as old as the race. But the treatment of these ills to which the flesh is heir has been changed out of all recognition as the result of research undertaken by men whose minds have been lightened consciously or unconsciously by wisdom from above. What is true of therapeutics applies with equal force to other departments of human life. They owe an unspeakable debt to the beneficial changes wrought as the result of the entrance of God's Word which giveth light. Human life has simply been revolutionised by Christ, as the contrast which still prevails between lands untouched by Christian influences, and those where the gospel is preached and honoured, proves. Wisdom is ever justified of her children.

That has an important bearing on our subject. We read in Hebrews iii. 3 that he that built the house hath more honour than the house. When these words are applied to Sir Christopher Wren and St. Paul's Cathedral, their full significance will shine forth. Christ then may be said to be the wise master-builder Who has erected the marvellous house of civilisation in which we live and move and have our being, and He is, on that score, all the more worthy to receive honour and dominion and power and glory. But the fact also reminds us that He is not mastered by what He has made. He cannot be destroyed by the work of His hands like man with lethal weapons. He is ever greater than anything He has made. There is a stanza from the Scottish metrical version of Psalm xciii (verses 3-4) which states that truth in very effective fashion.

The floods, O Lord, have lifted up,
they lifted up their voice;
The floods have lifted up their waves,
and made a mighty noise.

But yet the Lord that is on high,
is more of might by far
Than noise of many waters is,
or great sea-billows are.

That being the case, Christianity can never be destroyed by civilisation, since the latter owes its origin to the Gospel of free grace and undying love, and not only its origin but its life and force. Atheists who "wear the white flower of a blameless life" have been aptly compared to flowers cut from the stem, and placed in a glass. They endure for a little while but they soon fade since they are severed from the source of life, and that is equally true of civilisations. Time is required before these things can be clearly seen, and the factors at work are so many and so varied that it would be no easy task to convince a sceptic that the taproot of all the trouble is religious in character. But even he would surely concede that religion is a powerful factor in the moulding of civilisation if he is not prepared to admit that it is the basic one.

Proof of these propositions may be sought in the way in which Christianity has purged and purified the civilisation of which it is the progenitor. It is only necessary to refer to the abolition of the slave trade as an instance. For very many years it was condoned by the Christian conscience of England and America, but truth prevails in the end. Men can do nothing against it but for it, and the genius of the Gospel proved too strong at the last. It was given that men might know the truth of God, and that the truth might make them free. That could not be gainsaid for ever. Thus Christianity is always the critic and censor of its civilisation. The civilisation is not the context of Christianity. Christianity is the context of the civilisation. It was, and is, and will be to the end.

The real source of the difficulty lies in the fact that material civilisation outruns moral and spiritual advance in the most disconcerting fashion. The wars of the present century, so far as it has gone, are an illuminating commentary on that observation. The resources of civilisation are taxed to the uttermost for the destruction of human beings. The taming of men's passions has not kept pace with the speed with which they have got command of earth, and sea, and sky, to a sufficient degree to enable it to do wonders. The influence of the Gospel is less manifest in the moral and spiritual spheres than it is

in the realms of the intellect, and of material things. I am not now thinking of the evangelisation of mankind but only of the sobering and restraining effects which radiate from the gospel. The Divine kingdom of which the New Testament has so much to tell us will never be inaugurated until the King Himself comes back to earth. But, for our present purpose, it is well to note that the effects of Christianity are most manifest in the secular realm, less so in the moral, and least in the spiritual, the explanation lying in the degree of difficulty encountered. Civilisation outstrips evangelisation by such a margin that temporary confusion is created. But that need not dismay us unduly in view of Paul's profound words: "Howbeit that is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; then that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is of heaven" (1 Cor. xv. 46-47).

There is one unanswerable argument in favour of the contention which inspires this paper that Christianity has nothing to fear from the spread of the civilisation which is one of its by-products. "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. iv. 4). Thus the natural and the material have their rightful place, but it is not the first place. They belong to God. The human race simply cannot get away from that. God has made and redeemed man for Himself, and man's soul can know no rest until it rests in Christ. It may take some generations a tremendous amount of time to make that discovery, if indeed they ever succeed in doing so, but they cannot desist from searching. Man's relation to natural law provides an admirable parallel. Until the ways of Nature were understood as well as they are to-day, man was all his life in bondage to fear. Only with fuller knowledge, and corresponding obedience, has he come to live in harmony with the forces of Nature. He knew no peace or prosperity until he had done so. If that be true of the Creation, how much more must it be true of the Creator who is God blessed for ever.

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