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THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH IN THIS APOCALYPTIC HOUR¹

by AUSTIN A. FULTON

THIS lecture was delivered at the opening of the session of the Presbyterian College, Belfast, on October 7, 1959. It was one of Dr. Fulton's series of Carey Lectures on "The Missionary Nature of the Church". The lecture form has been preserved. Dr. Fulton is at present Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

SPEAKING at the Ghana Assembly of the International Missionary Council, Dr. John Mackay described this as an *apocalyptic hour*. "It is an hour," he said, "weighted with destiny, an hour when the elemental forces of human nature and history are laid bare, and when a titanic struggle is in process to determine the type of human individual who shall populate the world of to-morrow."² It is an hour of darkness for millions. For them no beam from above shines. The Divine Imperative is unknown — self-interest is the only guide. It is easier to break through sound barriers and to conquer outer space than to break through barriers of prejudice and conquer inner fear. Dangers and difficulties are, of course, not new. But they are magnified in this hour by the rapidly accelerating growth of world population, the means of movement we now possess, and the increasing difficulty we experience in communication between mind and mind. The curse of Babel is aggravated manifold when those who speak the same words cannot understand each other because the same words are made to bear different meanings. Intense specialization makes it difficult for members of different departments of the same academic institution to carry on a fundamental conversation.

Volumes have been written to clarify the place and relevance of the Church in the contemporary situation. You know them and understand that in a lecture like this it is not possible even

¹ There is no reference to Bishop Stephen Neill's brilliant *Creative Tension*. It did not come into my hand until after the above lecture had been delivered.

² *The Ghana Assembly of the International Missionary Council*, ed. R. J. Orchard (1958), p. 101.

to map roughly the ground that they cover. What we would attempt is to glimpse an understanding of how obligations inherent in the missionary nature of the Church relate to and are affected by some manifestations of the forces which are shaping this present hour.

I. FREEDOM AND THE CHRISTIAN MAN

The issue of Christian Liberty and the relation of Church and State is ever with us. The State is an institution possessing the means of coercion and is therefore the main focus in this concern. The State is also the means for the protection of believers and their churches. In this land we are accustomed to look to the State to secure for us the rights of conscience, freedom of worship, speech, association, publication, and property rights since property is deemed necessary for the performance of religious functions. We take it for granted that the state will protect us in all proper activity and expression which may be necessary to the life of the Church. In much of the world it is not so.

It is not so, for example, in China. The culture of China has been disrupted and thrown into chaos. The largest fairly homogenous group of mankind on earth is passing through the most radical and destructive revolution in its long history. There is bitter suffering for millions of Chinese and danger for other parts of the world, cruelly spotlighted this year by the murder of Tibet. Thirty years ago Dr. T. C. Fulton, speaking to the Board of Missions of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, said that China had the ball at her toe but that China did not know it. China knows it now, Asia trembles, and none dare ignore that growing ruthless might.

Within four years of going Communist, China, which had been the largest of all mission countries, expelled every one of five thousand missionaries and began her paralysing oppression of the Christian Church. Current reports indicate that Chinese Christians are being subjected to severe pressure. The Religious Affairs Bureau is forcing a vast merger of churches in a nationwide unionizing movement. This has had the effect of eliminating ninety per cent of all local church organizations: Shanghai, which had over two hundred churches, has now only twenty-three. Four churches remain of the sixty-five in Peking. And so it goes on. Stringent regulations are enforced which regiment and curtail church life, services, gatherings for prayer, and so on. Bible teaching may be carried on only in church buildings — the number of which has been so drastically reduced. To preach one must

be officially registered. Sunday services must not interfere with work requirements, and pastors and all church workers must be self-supporting.³ We little imagine what Christians in China suffer as the church bargains and battles for its life. We can understand, however, that it means more than the words could mean with us when the head of the Nanking Theological Seminary urged graduates "to live courageously the Christian life in the midst of agnosticism and atheism, to profit from enthusiasm in relation to the social challenge, and to be able to present and defend Christian beliefs."⁴ The Communist state, it should be added, is acting against other religions. Buddhism is also restricted and oppressed. Owing to its intrinsic character, however, Christianity attracts the greater hostility.

Again the state may endeavour to force all subjects to conform to one religion regarded as a unifying force in the community. We have known such action in the past. Churches themselves, not seldom, restrict the freedom of their members by rigid or narrow definition of the areas of freedom permitted in thought and practice. This may not seem oppressive if the people concerned do not think it so and if any who do find restrictions irksome are free to go elsewhere. There are times, however, when a church not only defines with narrow limits and with unbending rigidity the religious freedom of its own members but, if it has the power, influences the state, or public opinion, or both, to curtail the religious freedom of groups of which it does not approve. Spain and Colombia spring to mind. And because they spring to mind so readily it is needful to see them in perspective. The kind of oppression of which they are examples is on the decline. It is still with us but there is some encouragement in a recent report from the Missionary Research Library in New York which has this to say:⁵

The Roman Catholic problem has shrunk, partly because of liberalization in the societies and the policies of France, Belgium and certain Latin-American areas, until the only conspicuous places of acute hardship are Spain, the Portuguese colonies, Colombia, and phases of distress in some other Latin-American countries. Meanwhile adherents of other faiths than the dominant one are uncomfortable in Portugal, Italy, and much of Latin-America, also in Orthodox Greece and Ethiopia.

³ Roy Lautenschlager, *The Riddle of Communist China in Presbyterian Life*, August 1, 1959, pp. 8 ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Occasional Bulletin*, July 15, 1959 (Missionary Research Library, New York).

Spain and Colombia remain outstanding examples of what a powerful autocratic religious group professing the Christian allegiance can permit itself to do. It is also an example of something which neither by way of retaliation nor defence may we of the Reformed faith ever approve. Lapses in the past call not for repetition but repentance.

Influential voices have been raised in the cases of Spain and Colombia, not altogether without effect. What can we do in China? Directly, nothing. But the day is coming when circumstances will have changed and counsels different from those at present followed will prevail. The freedom of free people will then exert influence where today it has none. This, however, can only be if the free peoples remain free. We hold freedom in trust for others besides ourselves. We could lose such freedom as we possess, and the hope of freedom for others, more easily than we think. For when freedom is in danger the issue in which danger is involved is seldom simple and more seldom straightforward. That may be seen, for example, in the circumstances surrounding the Devlin Commission's Report on Nyasaland.⁶ The Church in Nyasaland rightly perceived that what some argue is purely an economic question is really a question of human dignity and therefore a religious question. To those with eyes to see, the question of religious liberty is involved in issues which, on the surface, could seem remote from matters of faith. Religious liberty as such is seldom openly attacked. Some other freedom is curtailed for some other and apparently non-religious reason and it is only the vigilant who discern that religious liberty is at stake. The Church must seek to guard against, and warn against, encroachments upon the civil liberties of thought and conscience, freedom of speech, publication and association whether it be of those who agree with us or of those with whom we disagree. If freedom must sometimes be curtailed because of the violent men this should be only interim action, not a state of affairs to be perpetuated, no matter how advantageous it may be to those in power. Curtailment of freedom, whether it be of a trade union, a religious persuasion, or a common crank, is to be avoided by all possible means. Granted that situations do arise when it may seem no longer possible to tolerate the intolerant without thereby destroying liberty and tolerance, our immediate danger lies in the opposite direction, that of succumbing

⁶ *Report of the Nyasaland Commission of Inquiry* (H.M. Stationery Office, 1959).

to the temptation to slide into intolerance in the name of justice or truth or it may be of some less worthy abstraction. Where civil liberties go, religious liberty must soon follow. Liberty is one and freedom is indivisible. Where human rights are respected by the state and adequately safeguarded, believers can do what is required of them by their faith. Where believers may no longer do what their faith reasonably requires, human rights no longer command respect.

Sometimes a religious body presumes upon the goodwill of the State to urge it to take action against those of whom it disapproves. We have heard of some in India to-day, for example, who hold that where there is unemployment Christians should be dismissed from their work before Hindus and that Christians should not be employed while there are Hindus looking for work. Have we ever heard hints at the usefulness of such discrimination nearer home? We would be poorly placed to judge Hindus for exercising hostile discrimination against Christians if Christians exercise such against each other to the grave peril of the freedom of the citizens in the state.

II. REVOLUTION AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The sides of the revolution of which we think are the political and the religious. In Asia, to speak of that continent only, the Christian Church is confronted with a situation unthought-of twenty years ago. Consider how far-reaching and thorough-going this contemporary revolution is: on the political side Rajah B. Manikam summarizes it as follows:⁷

More than half the world's population, living in the vast area between Karachi and Tokyo, is to-day involved in a major social revolution. ... Never before have so many millions of people taken part in such a rapid and radical social upheaval. ...

Half a century ago a handful of foreign troops was required to suppress the Boxer rebellion and impose Western terms on China. To-day the armies of sixteen nations, including some of the most powerful in the world, have been stalemated in Korea by the new Chinese army. In 1943 Winston Churchill proclaimed ... "I did not become His Majesty's Prime Minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire." To-day India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon, Indonesia and the Philippines are independent nations.

Of the peoples which knew Britain or other European nations as colonial powers some score have recently achieved independence — and in many cases the new independent nation is not so well disposed towards the Christian Church as had been the old colonizing power. Nationalism need not be hostile to Christianity.

⁷ *Christianity and the Asian Revolution*, ed. R. B. Manikam (1954), p. 3.

But when nationalism is intertwined with revival of an ancient culture and an ancestral faith the result is likely to work out in that way. The Church is regarded as a foreign importation and therefore something essentially alien.

On the religious side, the rapidity and strength with which new life has grown and expressed itself in the immediate past has taken most observers by surprise. This revolution is continuing with such vigour that writing in 1956 Kraemer judged "that for the first time since the Constantine victory in A.D. 312 and its consequences, the Christian Church is heading towards a real and spiritual encounter with the great non-Christian religions."⁸

A most important event in Buddhist history took place between May 1956 and May 1957. This was the celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's attainment of final blessedness. Amongst the results brought about by the impetus of this celebration note the following: Arrangements for the mass production of Buddhist literature; Plans for the Revival of Buddhist practices; Translations of the Pali Scriptures into the vernacular in Ceylon; Preparation of a Buddhist Encyclopedia; Recruitment to the Buddhist Priesthood; a Buddhist Reunion movement aimed at overcoming the divisions between the sects; and an Aggressive Buddhist Missionary Movement.⁹

A new development which may turn out to be of great importance is a layman's movement within this highly clerical religion. Participation in the Buddhist layman's movement means refusing to become a monk because one feels called to influence the life of the world through politics, education, business. Buddhists are following this calling although they believe that this means many added existences. This is a price that must be paid.

There is a determined effort at the present time to make Ceylon a Buddhist state. There is some Buddhist-inspired opposition to Christianity. This may be expected to increase if Buddhism becomes the established religion.

Buddhism offers a way of life making little doctrinal demand and independent of historical grounding. The Buddhist is indifferent to attack on ideological or historical grounds. For this as well for more positive reasons it has a strong appeal for many.

The resurgence of Hinduism is the other side of the growth of Indian nationalism. Extreme Hindu orthodoxy is set upon mak-

⁸ H. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (1956), p. 20.

⁹ *The Ghana Assembly of the International Missionary Council*, pp. 50 f.

ing India a Hindu state. So far Prime Minister Nehru stands in the way, but strange things may happen when he no longer holds the balance. Even reactionary Hinduism, however, cannot avoid change. For the first time in its history Hinduism is transforming itself into a missionary faith. The abolition of caste, although it is not yet very effective in the land, looks like a radical break with the past because Hinduism is a social system in which culture and religion are one. The abandonment of caste in principle and its gradual dying away in practice marks a far-reaching revolution in which much is being swept aside that was until yesterday regarded as unchangeable and essential. On the other hand much is left to be developed and we have the weighty judgment of Kraemer that "what is left of Hinduism may yet prove far more powerful than what is being destroyed." Of Hindu philosophy, for example, Kraemer has this to say: it is "a magnificent structure, worthy of comparison with any intellectual system in the world"; and on its religious side "Hinduism has shown how it can accept reforming impulses both from Christianity and Islam."¹⁰

While caste continued only those born with its structure could be Hindu. As caste passes away Hinduism is finding a new freedom to claim universal status and to receive converts.

For centuries Islam has suffered from divisions. Some of these were geographical, some theological. The Arab world had few contacts with Pakistan and Indonesia and there is reported to be considerable theological tension in Islam's academic circles. There is, for one thing, an Islamic modernist-fundamentalist controversy which is almost Christian in its intractability! One point at issue is the Higher Criticism of the Koran. For all that, Islam is making an appeal which cannot be ignored and is vigorously extending her boundaries, especially in Northern Nigeria. In Africa Islam enjoys a twofold advantage over Christianity: it is able to condone polygamy, which Christianity cannot do, and it can point to an absence of colour bar which Christianity cannot achieve.

The colour bar is seen at its worst in the land of the African. There, spurred on by fear, white minorities entrench themselves to resist pressures, economic, social and political, exerted with increasing strength by vast black majorities. The situation is not a simple one. It is made a highly dangerous one when the ruling minority panicks or when it presses ill-conceived legislation

¹⁰ *Frontier*, Vol. I, No. 2 (April, 1958), p. 126.

to such a point that violence is provoked in return. It becomes about as hopeless as a human situation can become when a Communion of the Christian Church, and one with a noble tradition in some respects, adopts a method of Scriptural eisegesis which produces biblical support for the superstition of racialism with its fictions about inferior and superior bloods. Islam can say to Africa: "These people who preach apartheid and enforce racial segregation in the name of their Sacred Book are members of the Christian faith. From this Islam is wholly free."

III. OBEDIENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Faced with spreading materialism and atheism there is an urge for all faiths which believe in the supernatural in some form or other to join forces. Toynbee has recently advanced such a plea.¹¹ From a somewhat different angle a similar suggestion was eloquently urged in a notable volume published in 1932.¹² This was the work of a self-appointed Commission of Appraisal of missionary work entitled *Re-Thinking Missions*, described in the sub-title as "A Laymen's Enquiry after One Hundred Years." William Ernest Hocking gave his prestige and distinction to the Chair. This work was remarkable in several ways: it was the work of highly competent and very intelligent laymen; it was prepared with a thoroughness which spared no expenditure of money or time; and in the event it disappointed the hopes of its authors and their friends: its brilliant hues proved to be the rays of sunset, not the morning glow of a new dawn.

That is not to deny that much of the book is of more than passing value. Together with the fact-finders' reports upon which it was based, it is full of valuable information. And there were illuminating insights too.

The missionary motive is described as "an ardent desire to communicate a spiritual value, regarded as unique and of supreme importance. It is an integral part of the passion for 'saving' men and peoples, and implies a peculiar sense of the tragedy and danger of the unsaved."¹³ The authors judged that the future argument of the Christian Faith would be "less with Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism than with materialism, secularism, naturalism."¹⁴ The extent of the present revival of ancient faiths was

¹¹ A. Toynbee, *Christianity among the Religions of the World* (1958).

¹² *Re-Thinking Missions*, ed. W. E. Hocking (1932).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

not anticipated. But that there should be revival was something for which the Commission hoped.

The Laymen's Commission of Inquiry urged that the welfare of the individual soul could not be secured independently of the welfare of his body, mind, and social context; philanthropy must not be used as a bait; it must stand in its own right. We must give even when there is no opportunity to preach; missions should not meddle with politics, but where a political issue is relevant to the mission the mission must insist that no government can have an interest in defeating the personal development of its citizens.¹⁵

To this and so much more we say "Amen". But when the basis for such policy is founded on premises which are incompatible with the uniqueness of the Christian revelation we understand also why this book has been described as the nadir of the type of theological thinking of which it is so distinguished an example. Hocking saw an eclectic faith emerging in which Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism at their higher levels would cross-fertilize each other and together bring in the reign of righteousness. In approaching the non-Christian the missionary should beware of the temptation to try to convert him and be well content if they can reach a measure of agreement and mutual understanding. The non-Christian, it was assumed, would become Christian by process of accumulating points of agreement with Christian teaching without the uncomfortable necessity of coming to terms with Christ Himself.

In December, 1938 there was an important meeting of the International Missionary Council at Tambaram, Madras. In preparation for this meeting another layman, Hendrik Kraemer, to whom reference has already been made, prepared a volume which was in effect a reply to Hocking: *The Christian Faith in a non-Christian World*¹⁶ has proved to be a major contribution to Missiology.

We are not unmindful of the large practical area over which Kraemer and Hocking coincide when we point out that they differ radically on the basic question of the nature of the Christian faith and therefore of the obedience which it demands. Like Hocking, Kraemer approaches other faiths with friendly and appreciative attitude. He is willing to confer with them and in any way possible to co-operate with them. He is no friend of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-77; cf. Kraemer, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

¹⁶ Edinburgh House Press, 1938.

arrogant religious imperialism nor intolerant dogmatism. Walter Marshall Horton summed up Kraemer's approach neatly¹⁷ :

What Kraemer offers to non-Christian lands is no ready-made system of thought, no imposing — and invading — body of full-fashioned cultural patterns, but simply a piece of news of transcendent importance for all the world : the news that, as we do verily believe, God has shown mankind His nature and His will in a series of mighty acts culminating in Jesus Christ, His gracious life and sacrificial death and amazing victory and the shedding forth of His Spirit upon the Church.

In 1956 Kraemer published his massive *Religion and the Christian Faith*. In this major contribution to its subject Kraemer develops, corrects, and advances positions put forward in 1938. The reason for the Church's existence is stated thus :

In its missionary outreach, in its discharge of its missionary obligation the Church reveals its deepest reason of existence; that is, to continue the ministry of Christ in the world. In the sending of his Son (God so loved the world) God was wholly extravert. The mission of the Church is the reflection of this divine extravertness. In its missionary work the Church is constantly looking towards "the ends of the earth" and "the ends of time". Therefore, in the mission of the Church, a special note is sounded in which the announcing, the transmitting, the confessing, expresses itself — the note of pervasive entreaty, of the desire to win over, the passion for souls.¹⁸

The purpose of the Church cannot be fulfilled by the pursuit of any syncretistic goal since the only way of reducing religions to a common denominator is to empty them each of their essential content. Kraemer states emphatically his doctrine of the pluralism of religions. What is universal is religious consciousness but "the more one penetrates different religions and tries to understand them in their total peculiar entity, the more one sees that they are worlds in themselves, with their own centres, axes, and structures, not reducible to each other or to a common denominator which expresses their inner core and makes them all translucent."¹⁹ The acts of God in His self-revelation in history cannot be subsumed under some general idea.

The principle of discontinuity is asserted when the pluralism of religions is affirmed. If you accept this view, as it is to be hoped you do, it will make you more than a little cautious when using language suggesting that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the highest aspirations in all religions. This will not be due to failure or refusal to appreciate the excellences of any religion. It

¹⁷ *The Authority of the Faith*, Tambaram Series, Vol. I (1939), p. 156.

¹⁸ Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, p. 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

should be the result of the clear and unconfused kind of thinking on the point given expression by H. H. Farmer in saying:

If the essence of Christianity, whatever else it may be, rests on and reports the act of the Living God in the historic Incarnation, then it is impossible to see how, or in what sense, any development of truths, however rich these may be, can lead up to, prepare for, or find fulfilment in such an act. Only if Christianity were a collection of philosophical or moral truths, might the word "fulfilment" in this sense be applicable, though it would not necessarily be so. But Christianity being what it is, the word is as inapplicable and improper as it would be if I were to say that my sketchy knowledge of physics has been fulfilled when I fall downstairs and break my neck. No development of my knowledge could bring me a hair's breadth nearer the actuality of such a suprising event.²⁰

The experience of the Christian mission which lies behind this conclusion indicates that becoming a Christian involves a complete break with the old culture. This realization, together with the dissolution of Christendom, is contributing to contemporary awakening awareness of the missionary nature of the Church. In its turn this has given impetus to the ecumenical movement. Upon that we shall dwell for a few closing moments.

An Indian student who attended the Irish Evanston²¹ described it as interesting but amazing, because, he said, the delegates were not interested in Church Union, only in talking about it. With us the issue is academic. But in many mission-field churches it is a very live issue indeed. We take our divisions for granted and complacently assume that the present situation is good enough and likely to last our time. But our disagreement with this or the plan or suggestion for the unification of segments of the Church here and there must not be taken to justify us when we ignore the problem set by our oneness in Christ and our divisions in His Church. That there should be variety in unity is desirable but that there should be unity in variety is desirable too. Whatever it is that is prayed for in the seventeenth chapter of St. John it includes a manifestation of such a kind that the world will be convinced. Spiritual oneness there must be. There must also be some visible expression of the spiritual unity opaque enough and down to earth enough for the world to see it. The world must be able to see it with sufficient clarity to be convinced by it. We are a long way from any such world-convincing demonstration of our one-ness in Christ.

How then are we deploying our forces? The World Council

²⁰ *The Authority of the Faith*, pp. 165 f.

²¹ Held in Dublin, January 2-6, 1956.

of Churches and the International Missionary Council are not essays in Church Union. They are practical experiments in co-operation. These are moving towards integration at the present time. There are several other organizations however, which do not participate even in the co-operation these afford. They are based mainly on North America from which most of all Protestant missionary effort comes. Thirty-five Mission Boards in the U.S.A. and Canada are affiliated with the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association.²² They are all doctrinally orthodox and ecclesiastically exclusive. Their strength lies in their urge to go to places otherwise unreached. In 1956 some of these groups supported over 500 skilled translators in the Oklahoma School of Linguistics who work at translating the Scriptures into languages hitherto without versions of the Bible. And in other ways some of these groups make remarkable showing. The Christian Missionary Alliance Churches with a small membership of 60,000 support 700 missionaries. The Mennonites, with a membership of only 12,000, support over 180 missionaries and in 1956 contributed over £160,000 for this purpose. The Pentecostal World Fellowship does work too, which cannot be ignored. It may save us from temptation to look down upon such from our dizzy ecclesiastical heights to compare the corresponding statistics of our own missionary effort — if the comparison is not too depressing.

Four-fifths of the people on the earth are beyond the Christian fold and the number is increasing. There are great areas of life around our doors, in our streets and factories and yards and mills, which we are failing completely to touch. In the obedience of faith we bear a responsibility, serious and unescapable, for them all.

It is no accident that it is on the frontiers of the Church's mission that the need for oneness in witness is most poignantly felt. The kind of unity for which we look and, we believe, for which our Lord prayed will not come by way of ecclesiastical merger or doctrinal accommodation. It will begin to be realized when the missionary task of the Church is seen as the end of her worship and structure. By the means of grace God's people are prepared to serve Him.

Your lecturer takes such interest in the Church's liturgiology as he may, in her theology as he is able, and in her machinery of administration as he must. He would denigrate none, but

²² Lindsell, *IRM* XLVII, No. 186, pp. 202 ff.

magnify all. Each, however, in its own order. I would that we should all be persuaded that neither Liturgical Pageantry, nor Theological Orthodoxy, nor Ecclesiastical Unity, nor any claim to be the Church, nor Historical Continuity, nor Unbroken Tradition, nor Apostolic Succession nor Political Power, can be substitute for the Missionary Consecration of the Church to Jesus Christ her Lord.

Freedom is lost or in peril. Christian men are buffeted by the waves of revolutionary seas. The redemptive purposes of God in Christ must be furthered by a world-embracing Christian Fellowship which, in the form of a servant, knows the Missionary Nature of the Church for only so in this — or in any hour — can His servants serve Him in the Obedience of Faith.

Belfast.