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The Christian Mission, with Special Reference to Islam

I

CONSIDERING that the Christian Mission is approaching its two-thousandth birthday, it exhibits a distinct vitality. What change of circumstances it has witnessed, what pressures it has endured, to what adaptations it has been influenced! With the long record of its history before us, in spite of periods documented with complete inadequacy, it is hard to imagine any entirely new contingencies which could arise for which past experience has not some guidance to offer.

Possessed by an exalting enthusiasm and passion for the words, works and personality of Jesus Christ as author and embodiment of a divine revelation, His first disciples witnessed to the power of His Spirit and proclaimed in ever-widening outreaches the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Materially poor and insignificant, sometimes persecuted and forced underground, leaving monuments in the catacombs, yet confidently 'appealing to Caesar' in spite of the risks involved and infiltrating one of the mightiest empires the world has known, they persevered through good and evil report until they were recognised as the licit religion of that Empire and embarked upon the labours of centuries of gradual assimilation as *lex* and earthly dominion. In spite of the realisation of the dyarchy in human affairs and always longing for the subordination of all power and authority to God, the church sometimes disregarded the persuasion of men's minds and fell into an inferior but benevolently intended coercion, to the ultimate dispraise of Christian freedom and the spiritual autonomy of the individual. It exhibited and still exhibits the ineluctible dualism of the divine-human society. It certainly had a divine treasure, but all too surely showed that it had this treasure in earthen vessels. As it was human it was fallible, but as it was divine it pressed on with emancipating and redemptive power, self-condemning, penitent before God and humbly submitting to divine judgment upon itself, in spite of all waywardness seeking less its own self-justification than the justification of God.

Thus the Christian Mission may be considered in the rarified atmosphere of theological disquisition, in which are sought out the ultimate

principles of the divine action among men, but also as it is unfolded on the stage of history as human response. Upon the face of its earthly progress can be traced human effort, the record of situations which have been empirically confronted, the wounds it has sustained in its way-faring, its temporary limitations, its halts and its failures in faith and vision; and yet through all it has continued to cling to a conviction that even thus through real men, agonising and striving for their own salvation, the reality and efficacy of divine grace was being manifested in redemptive activity of which they knew themselves in need equally with those to whom they ministered. From the inworking of faith in their own lives they gathered increasing confidence that the divine grace would work outward into the masses of the needy world. The changes of the centuries have not diminished that conviction.

The Gospel which the Christian Mission was to proclaim was in the first instance the proclamation of grace and a testimony to the facts of the life, person, teaching and passion of Jesus of Nazareth, but was also a witness to experiences associated with the impact of those events upon people who were in His fellowship during His earthly life or by the power of His Spirit had come to know and believe something which had transforming power in their lives. Institutions and theologies were derivative; primary was the new life which was Christ's gift. 'I came that they might have life and might have it more abundantly.' One may therefore say that the history of divine events, and of men's apprehension of the divine truth and power which those events carried, is the primary content of the Christian Gospel. 'God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world unto himself.'

II

But the apprehension is by fallible men. And as in the apprehension so also in the proclamation. In prosecution of the mission aiming at the stirring of conscience in the course of which self-rebuke was never intentionally absent, for Christ's denunciations of self-righteousness could not suffer any such complacency to last long, the missionary exercised a diagnostic and critical function which did not always meet with the approval of those towards whom it was directed. Great men outside Christendom like Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, though themselves not least among the propagators of world-cults on a quite remarkable scale, now and again complained of the arrogance and censoriousness of missionaries. 'Let us have no preaching. Christ

did not preach himself or any dogma' once wrote Rabindranath. But this did not prevent either of them from loving C. F. Andrews and appreciating his spiritual qualities. It may be that these critics observed some traces of professionalism among missionaries, especially when in the process of time they were clearly recognised as the agents of highly organised societies. But it was rather unrealistic to call for no preaching from those whose all-absorbing obedience was to the command 'Go and preach'. This is an example of the *skandalon* of which Christ warned his disciples.

This is one aspect, the human aspect, the hazard of human misunderstanding illustrated by the human vicissitudes, grave and gay, glorious and deplorable in the annals of the progress of the Christian Church. If one considers the Christian Mission to be part of the adventure of human communication, it will not be exempt from the deficiencies which mark fallible human action. In communication at any level there must be distinguished the substantial truth which is to be communicated and the faltering idiom in which it is sought to convey the truth. The success of the venture depends to some extent on the efficiency of the communicator and the goodwill of the responding party in receiving the communication. Clumsiness and misunderstanding too easily arise from a variety of causes, and so what is intended to be all light and love does not emerge as bright and loving as could be wished. Lack of humility can be exhibited both by communicator and respondent. Some people think it an insult that they should be thought to be in need of instruction, but it seems a mark of petulance for anyone to be irritated at the offer of good news, if it could be seen in that light. True! Men are not always wise, tactful or loving when they seek to persuade their fellows, and the results of their blunders are often almost disastrous.

Sometimes pride of race or nationality is a hindrance to both the giving and the receiving of the Gospel. Extraneous matters are allowed to influence the situation too much. Political rivalries and jealousies prejudice the situation, as if there should be respect of persons in the sharing of those things which should be the common enjoyment of all men. Can there really be foreignness in things of the spirit? So far as the Christian Mission is concerned there is abundant evidence that great evangelists have conceived their mission in the widest terms. Francis of Assisi is a portent for the revival of the home church of his time, but he still penetrates to the heart of the Muslim army on a mission of peace. Wesley translates his urgent call into missionary work among

the Indians of Georgia, but carries it on among the miners of Kingswood and the mobs of Wednesbury. The chaplains attached to European military or civil groups abroad inevitably extend their service to the nationals of these lands; like the saintly Henry Martyn, chaplain to the East India Company and translator of the New Testament into Urdu and Persian. Whether 'undistinguishing regard' cast on Adam's race has for some an Arminian nuance, Charles Wesley's expression is yet in harmony with the inner convictions of those dedicated to the wider service of mankind like William Carey and his fellow missionaries, and the net is cast wide in the interests of 'completing the number of the elect and hastening the kingdom'. Fundamentally the Christian missionary cannot be nicely discriminating. It would be hard for him to exclude anyone without prejudice to what he understands to be a universal message. A gospel not for all is for no one at all; otherwise there could always be the fear that one was one of the exceptions.

Unintentionally there may arise fear lest a mission should be a threat to disrupt the solidarity of a community, and then the Christian Mission is looked upon as a kind of 'fifth column' menacing the integrity of a state. There are many illustrations of this point in the annals of Christian missions. There is evidence from as early as the seventh century that missionaries to China sought certificates of legality for the religion they were seeking to spread. In the Tang Dynasty an imperial edict declared Christianity to be a legal religion after the close examination of translations of Christian documents. Intense interest was expressed in the pacific virtues of the Christians. Indeed, in mediæval times missions had little to differentiate them from embassies in the mode of conducting their affairs. The Jesuits were introduced into the courts of the Mogul Emperor and Peking. With the Holy Roman Empire, Christianity had become as *lex* the enforceable way of life backed by the power of the empire and acting in conjunction with the secular authority. The way a statesman like the Cardinal Nicholas de Cusa faces the position is clear from his *De Pace Fidei* wherein he outlines a *modus vivendi* between peoples professing various religions. Perhaps to many Indians the Christian evangelisation of the depressed classes, particularly by the mass movements, may have appeared as a threat of disruption to the established order of society. Political alarm was caused and nationalists were aroused to opposition to Christian missions in spite of the good service they rendered to the community at large. Illustrations such as these could be multiplied and show how

the Christian Mission could become involved in the complex of human affairs and concerns other than the purely religious, and the course of events affected in one way and another. To some fervent nationalists missionaries incurred the odium of 'colonialism', and conversion was regarded as disloyalty to one's culture and one's country. There can be no doubt that at a certain level there was much which could be blamed as mere proselytisation, but it should be remembered also in this regard that Christ sternly rebuked proselytisers. To alienate men from one group and attach them to another by a conversion which is simply a change of label is most reprehensible.

III

It is when we come to events at the rise of Islam that we see how the human factors really external to the sphere of pure religion, and not concerned with the healing and strengthening of the human spirit, assumed a decisive dominance. The contempt with which their Arab mercenaries were treated by the Byzantine overlords, and the failure of the Church of the Mediterranean littoral to take all the opportunities which the dispersion of Arabs throughout Asia Minor and North Africa offered for dedicated service for the unprivileged, resulted in the day of Arab resurgence in the birth of a protestant Islam. We have evidence from the early chronicles how religion had become a pawn in the schemes of imperial rivalry. How little the people of the day could regard religion as a matter of purely spiritual and personal choice, and voluntary response is illustrated for us from a story in the *Annals of Agapius*, the early Christian Arabic writer (tenth century A.D.). The people of the Christian metropolitan city of Edessa were on the borders of land often disputed between Persia and Byzantium and at this particular time the Persians were in possession. A disgruntled doctor brought it to the attention of the Persian court that the Christians of Edessa were adherents of the Malkite sect, the established Byzantine Church, which was under Muhammad's contemporary Heraclius, the Byzantine Emperor. This, he considered, was undesirable and so he advised the Persian ruler to convert them to either the Jacobite or the Nestorian sects, Christian non-conformists under the patronage of Persia. The order went forth, but a short time afterwards Heraclius reconquered the city and reconverted the inhabitants to the Malkite sect. Is it surprising, therefore, that the newly rising Arab power should, in imitation of the political precedent, come to regard

distinctness in religion as a *sine qua non* in its new order? A proclamation, perhaps erroneously attributed to Muhammad himself, but nevertheless indicating the approved practice, is extant from the earliest days of the Islamic expansion, calling upon the Byzantine ruler in Alexandria to yield up his authority and accept the Muslim creed of the Unity of God.

From these early days, therefore, the Islamic faith became notoriously 'rebellious' by its actions in the political field, quite apart from the conspicuous ambiguities of the Qur'ān in the description of Christian belief. It may be that Semitic reactions to the Greeks have also to be included in the analysis of forces at work to sever Arab from Byzantine. The hesitations in the expressed judgments of the Qur'ān bear witness to the way in which the Prophet's mind was working. At first we read: 'Thou shalt certainly find of them nearest in love to the believers those who say, "We are Christians" (Sura v. 85), but later the Sword Verse is revealed, and 'Fight those who believe not, such men of those given the Scripture (Jews and Christians) as do not practise the religion of truth' (Sura ix. 29). Distinctive religious belief here becomes a sort of hall-mark of genuine political loyalty. But when a Christian today complains that 'Islam' is more the badge of a group solidarity than of a religious conviction, even if his judgment is true, he should recognise how much the stage of history was set at the rise of Islam to bring this about. With an historical background such as this the Christian Church must in proper proportion acknowledge its own responsibility for action of old, which creates subsequent difficulties that have arisen in the relations between Islam and Christianity.

No nation approaches another in a diplomatic mission with a *tabula rasa*. History must always condition the mission, giving it more or less chance of success, preparing for or prejudicing the situation. If one could wipe the slate clean of all records one could perhaps begin *de novo* to assess the position on its merits. When history is prejudicial a new spirit is a *sine qua non*, and it is always best to face the situation frankly and not seek to hoodwink the present generation by a re-writing of history to suit the new conditions. Decisions taken blindly or under deception can in the end turn out disastrous.

What is true on the political plane is also true in the case of the relations between Islam and Christianity, and not least because the political estrangement has from first to last had such a profound influence. Initially, Christianity was in the privileged position *vis à vis* Islam and upon her must fall the major responsibility for the schism

and misunderstanding which ensued, although the sole responsibility is not hers. But as a consequence one may consider that Christianity cannot approach Islam in a self-righteous and patronising spirit, but rather with contrition for her initial share in the misunderstandings at the rise of Islam. Too often the Christian Church is to be condemned because it is not Christian enough. If sometimes one considers that there is a one-sided judgment or a dual standard, it should be remembered that it is ultimately encouraging to think that Christians are judged by the unbelieving by Christian standards, because this gives promise that it will be the Christian standards which will ultimately prevail.

If the Christian Church had not been so preoccupied with the defence of its preserves and had shewn the out-reaching missionary compassion and dedication to the service of the unprivileged to which it later awoke, what a different tale there would have been to tell. Need Muhammad have had such a garbled and inadequate account of Christian belief if he had had the New Testament available in some way for his instruction in his own tongue? Not that one can accuse the Christians of that day and age of being guilty because they had not a literate public and the power to broadcast literature in the present-day manner. That would have been as foolish as to quarrel with the ancient Britons for not using telephones. But even allowing for the limitations of the day and the necessity for most communication to take place by word of mouth, it still should have been possible that a more fully instructed Church could have risen above the apocryphal inanities of which the Qur'an gives evidence. The opportunity ought to have been seized to instruct those large Arab groups already nominally Christian, like the Ghassanids. And today the lesson should be learned that an uninstructed Church exposes the Christian witness to many dangers.

When we review the legacy of history it is very admonitory and reveals how a rival dogmatism can be brought into being which causes deep ideological rifts hard to surmount. There has been a gradually widening gulf, a gradual divergence. If we credit the descriptions of Muslim sects given by Al Baghdadi and Shahrastani, it is obvious that there was within Islam itself, until its orthodoxy was hardened into the monolithic structure it later exhibited, a great variety of opinion. Milder and less antagonistic influences might have prevailed to bring Islam and Christianity closer together. Indeed it is remarkable that there is still left so much in the common stock which can freely be

claimed as essential to the two religions: Creative Might, merciful and compassionate, exercising providence, sternly rebuking unrighteousness and summoning men to a new life and divine forgiveness, communicating His will through prophets and scriptures, among which it gives a high place to Jewish and Christian Scripture and a most exalted station to Jesus Christ, the Word of God, and 'a Spirit from the Lord', born of a Virgin, exalted to heaven and coming again in an eschatological mission. The Nativity assumes a special place in Muslim thought, and it may be recalled how Al Ghazzali is movingly described as experiencing an ecstasy in the Dome of the Rock when he observed there that relic of the childhood of Christ, the Cradle of Isa.

It is now quite clear that Islam strongly protests against the very data on which Christian faith is founded. The Nativity may be approved, but not the Word made flesh. The translation to the heavens may be stoutly maintained, but not the resurrection after the experience of death. The Qur'an refers to the crucifixion ambiguously, but now dogmatically the Muslim, whether of orthodox or Ahmadi persuasion, denies the crucifixion. And what is thus denied is not to be regarded as a scepticism about details which are of little importance and not a revision of history, but of things which the Christian considers to be fundamental to his faith. They are not necessarily the precisely formulated and credally expounded theological articles but the very warp and woof of the New Testament version of the *Gospel*, the good news of the Divine involvement in the human predicament, the nature of the universe, the agape-love of God, His self-giving and His redemptive work. To reject these, the Christian feels, would be to reject the record, consider it unworthy of credence, present another substituted documentary authority for different events which do not bear the same significance and which claims authority as a counter-revelation.

The primary requirement for the Christian is not to make Christianity more acceptable to Muslims but that faith should speak to faith. Not that an irenicon should be produced in which doubt speaks to doubt and lays aside this and that because it may not be so. Let faith speak to faith, and the spirit of man under the operation of the Spirit of God will come to know of the doctrine whether it be of God. We shall not edify one another by whittling away our strongest and most compelling convictions. We realise that the mistakes of the early days were not the only ones. Historically we may be sure that the divergence of thought was not so great at first as to constitute a dogmatic barrier, but contributed to by both parties; there was a curtain of restraint and

a dumb spirit was cast on both parties so that they were not on speaking terms. The absurd ideas which sprang up in Christendom such as the fabrication of the Muslim's worship of the idol of Muhammad—a fantastic misrepresentation of Muslim belief, the creation of the mental image of Islam as the Enemy-in-Chief, which made the Crusades possible—whether the provocation came from the Muslim doctrine of Jihad or not; the picture of Islam as the repository of all heresies; all this could hardly be changed into a more truly Christian, forgiving, reconciling and redemptively devoted attitude and activity, except under the inspiration humbly and contritely received of the newly discerned loving spirit of Christ, as so clearly at work in Peter the Venerable and Raymund Lull.

But since the consolidation of dogmatic blocs has been achieved and preconceptions have prevailed so long, and seemingly irreconcilable loyalties have been created, it cannot be a light task for the healing of divine grace to bring about a new fellowship and mutual service. Even if one side were willing to give would the other consider itself obliged to take? To those who are most desirous of seeing a new freedom of interchange of service and a more satisfactory achievement of communication it seems fatal to hope for proper communication so long as dogmatic barriers are opposed to the exposition of any individual or community's 'apologia' for its life, faith and thought. Saddest of all when it seems that a fear arises lest some lack of prestige should be the result if frank exchange is promoted.

IV

The Christian missionary to Islam has the strongest kind of conviction, confirmed often during years of intercourse and friendship with Muslims, that much which is rejected by Islam is rejected because it is not understood and not interpreted in the right way. He feels that if he could only persuade his Muslim friends to a new point of view of the facts, antagonisms could be lessened and a fruitful dialogue ensue, profitable all round. While too much could be claimed for a book like *The City of Wrong* and its implications wrongly assessed as concession to the Christian view of Good Friday, the perception of values which the book reveals is most important. Similarly in other books by sincere Muslims the softening of the views of harsh omnipotence for the milder aspect of divine love is to be welcomed. These might indicate a willingness to mitigate harsh antagonisms and to

embark on fruitful dialogue. The recent Colloquium in the United States, the conversations between Muslim and Dominican doctors in Cairo, the promotion of dialogue which the Anglican Church has made possible through Doctor Kenneth Cragg in many centres in the near and middle East, and any degree of openness and readiness to listen as well as speak are very welcome. Whether this must always be left to the few, to eccentric individuals, or to small groups, or whether the whole of Christianity can speak with a united voice about the things which belong to its peace and its salvation is a question we often ask ourselves. So much that has been done by individual Christians has been lost in obscurity. We remember how Martin Luther deplored the fact that the work of Ricoldo da Monte di Croce's work on Islam and the Qur'ān had remained unknown for 200 years.

Muslims have been addressed at great labour and with great ability without their knowing anything about it. The books which have been written have been confined to Christian circles and have at last died away into a Christian soliloquy. One wonders whether Muslims of a former generation, or even of the present age, ever had any idea that St Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa contra Gentiles* directly under the necessity of making a theological approach to Islam.

Now there remains to ask how shall we find a wider platform to hear what each other says. Communicate we must. We shall die if we go on talking to ourselves, even if we talk *about* one another. And here a more cogent and penetrating question arises which has already been touched upon above. Do we speak out of conviction to conviction? Anything else will be fruitless. Can Muslims and Christians only come to the point of valuable intercommunication when they have sacrificed all that is specially distinctive of their faith? Must both seek out the lowest common denominator of their thought so as to avoid offence? If this is so, how sterile the result! That there is something distinctive to communicate is the very life of the interchange, and without it what new thing are we to set our minds and tongues to? It may be objected that assured faith and the quest for truth are contradictory. Thus the protagonists wrap themselves in their own assurance and remain impervious to the new explorations of thought which lie before them. Deep conviction can be consistent with the acknowledgement of something still to learn, and the possibility of the cross-fertilisation of ideas should always be recognised. We cannot stand permanently poised hurling rival authorities at one another.

It is not true that in a very real sense we are all in quest? Should we resent the imputation even as Christians that we are not? 'Now I have found the ground wherein sure my soul's anchor may remain.' Are we not 'Comprehensors' and not 'Viators'? Having comprehended that which is presented to him by God in fullest measure, the Christian is still *in via*. 'Not that I have already attained or am already made perfect, but I press on.' To hold and to testify that we have received a perfect revelation does not mean the same thing as to be perfect recipients of it. God has still new discoveries for us to make. We have not yet attained to an all-inclusive (or should it perhaps be all-exclusive?) interpretation of God's revelation. Assurance must be accompanied with humility if we are to enter really into dialogue with people of other faiths and alien convictions. If we are complete and lack nothing, what can contribute to our store? Let faith speak to faith since we have this treasure in earthen vessels. This seems to be the truly Christian attitude, the attitude best befitting those who consider their highest calling to be the communication of a Gospel of reconciliation and redemptive love, and in this we are in no wise disloyal to the truth we have apprehended, but are held so securely by our faith that we can venture into the other man's world with confidence.