

## CHAPTER I

### THE DEFINITION OF CHRISTENDOM

The beginning of Christendom is, strictly, at a point out of time. A metaphysical trigonometry finds it among the spiritual Secrets, at the meeting of two heavenward lines, one drawn from Bethany along the Ascent of Messiah, the other from Jerusalem against the Descent of the Paraclete. That measurement, the measurement of eternity in operation, of the bright cloud and the rushing wind, is, in effect, theology.

The history of Christendom is the history of an operation. It is an operation of the Holy Ghost towards Christ, under the conditions of our humanity; and it was our humanity which gave the signal, as it were, for that operation. The visible beginning of the Church is at Pentecost, but that is only a result of its actual beginning—and ending—in heaven. In fact, all the external world, as we know it, is always a result. Our causes are concealed, and mankind becomes to us a mass of contending unrelated effects. It is the effort to relate the effects conveniently without touching, without (often) understanding, the causes that makes life difficult. The Church is, on its own showing, the exhibition and the correction of all causes. It began its career by arguing about its own cause—in such time as it had to spare from its even greater business of coming into existence.

Historically, its beginning was clear enough. There had

appeared in Palestine, during the government of the Princes Augustus and his successor Tiberius, a certain being. This being was in the form of a man, a peripatetic teacher, a thaumaturgical orator. There were plenty of the sort about, springing up in the newly-established peace of the Empire, but this particular one had a higher potential of power, and a much more distracting method. It had a very effective verbal style, notably in imprecation, together with a recurrent ambiguity of statement. It continually scored debating-points over its interlocutors. It agreed with everything on the one hand, and denounced everything on the other. For example, it said nothing against the Roman occupation; it urged obedience to the Jewish hierarchy; it proclaimed holiness to the Lord. But it was present at doubtfully holy feasts; it associated with rich men and loose women; it commented acerbly on the habits of the hierarchy; and while encouraging everyone to pay their debts, it radiated a general disapproval, or at least doubt, of every kind of property. It talked of love in terms of hell, and of hell in terms of perfection. And finally it talked at the top of its piercing voice about itself and its own unequalled importance. It said that it was the best and worst thing that ever had happened or ever could happen to man. It said it could control anything and yet had to submit to everything. It said its Father in Heaven would do anything it wished, but that for itself it would do nothing but what its Father in Heaven wished. And it promised that when it had disappeared, it would cause some other Power to illumine, confirm, and direct that small group of stupefied and helpless followers whom it deigned, with the sound of the rush of a sublime tenderness, to call its friends.

It did disappear—either by death and burial, as its opponents held, or, as its followers afterwards asserted, by some later and

less usual method. Those followers at any rate remained, according to all the evidence, in a small secret group in Jerusalem. They supposed themselves to be waiting for the new manifestation which had been promised, in order that they might take up the work which their Lord had left them. According to their own evidence, the manifestation came. At a particular moment, and by no means secretly, the heavenly Secrets opened upon them, and there was communicated to that group of Jews, in a rush of wind and a dazzle of tongued flames, the secret of the Paraclete in the Church. Our Lord Messiah had vanished in his flesh; our Lord the Spirit expressed himself towards the flesh and spirit of the disciples. The Church, itself one of the Secrets, began to be.

The Spirit also had his epiphany to the farther world. He had manifested before the nations—those from the parts of Libya about Cyrene, strangers of Rome, and the rest. Before ever the official missions began, the dispersed thousands who on that day had caught something of the vision and heard something of the doctrine, and had even—some of them—been convinced by vision and doctrine to submit to a Rite, to baptism, had returned to their own land, if not as missionaries yet as witnesses. The Spirit took his own means to found and to spread Christendom before a single apostolic step had left Jerusalem. It prepared the way before itself. Yet this was but a demonstration, as it were; the real work was now to begin, and the burden of the work was accepted by the group in the city. That work was the regeneration of mankind. The word has, too often, lost its force; it should be recovered. The apostles set out to generate mankind anew.

They had not the language; they had not the ideas; they had to discover everything. They had only one fact, and that was that *it had happened*. Messiah had come, and been killed,

and risen; and they had been dead “in trespasses and sin,” and now they were *not*. They were re-generate; so might everyone be. “The promise,” they called to the crowd at Jerusalem, “is to you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off.” “Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the Holy Ghost.” They had believed in Jesus of Nazareth, without very clearly understanding him; his Resurrection had seemed to justify them; but much more now they were justified, or rather he was justified. The thing had happened. In every kind of way it was true that the God of Israel would not leave their souls in hell nor suffer his Holy One to see corruption.

So far the apostles. They had, in their turn, to proceed to the operation which the Spirit had begun. But the operation had to be continued under conditions; and the conditions at that moment were three—Jewish religion, Roman order, Greek intellect. Messiah had been necessarily rejected and denounced on his cross in all three tongues and by all three elements—piety, government, culture. The Church, though no doubt it later came to regard itself as being, eternally, the cause of Judah and of all salvations, appeared very much at the moment as nothing but a successor to and a substitute for Judah. It proposed at first to continue a habitual consciousness of Judah. Messiah himself had been a Jew; he had been put to death for blasphemy, but for Jewish blasphemy. His comments on the Gentiles during his life had been strongly Judaic; nor is it hinted that after his Resurrection they were, since he had forgiven his executioners, any less Judaic. The apostles and disciples attended the Temple. The missionaries of Pentecost were Jews. All this gave rise to two arguments, one within and one without the Church.

The argument outside was with the Jews, and from the point of view of the Jews Christendom was nothing but a Jewish heresy. The dispute between orthodox Jews and heretical Jews was on one point only—had or had not the temporal mission of Judah been completed? had it been fulfilled? must Judah now abdicate? It is difficult for an individual (as is so often seen in family life) and almost impossible for an institution to abdicate in favour of its child and successor, especially in matters of philosophy. The Jews did not propose to try. They maintained the old orthodox view of the Covenant as against the new heretical view that, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Covenant had undergone a violent re-formation. There was certainly a Centre party, who were overthrown as Centres usually are. Gamaliel was the first, in Christian times, to utter a maxim too often forgotten by Christians—that there is no need to be too ardent against other people on behalf of the Omnipotence. But his protest, though at first successful, afterwards failed; and the scourging of the apostles was followed by the stoning of St. Stephen. There existed for a while an active persecution of the offending sect; it was pursued to other cities, and every effort was made to re-establish the philosophical sublimity of Unincarnate Deity.

Within the young Church another, and similar, argument was no less sharp. The general view among Jews outside the Church was that Jesus of Nazareth had been primarily a blasphemer. But the general view inside the Church was that he had been primarily a Jew. He had particularly not waived a single letter of the Law; he had hardly gone farther in liberal interpretation of the Law than some of the greater Rabbis. He had allowed that necessity might override ceremonial, but he had discouraged any light-hearted waiving of ceremonial. The apocryphal story of his comment to the

man seen gathering sticks on the Sabbath: "O man, if thou knowest what thou doest, blessed art thou; but if thou knowest not, thou art cursed," seems to have expressed his intention. "All that the Scribes and Pharisees bid you, observe and do." It was this maxim, and others like it, to which the more rigorous party clung. Their maxim involved two principles: (i) that the mission of the Church was solely to the Jews (ii) that therefore the whole Jewish ceremonial should be maintained in its fullness. It must be admitted that they were noble souls; rejected by the Jews, they maintained within the new society the paramount privileged order of the Jews. And they seem, at first, to have been the dominant party within the Church.

Yet they failed. The argument eventually was decided against them, and decided by the agreed voices of the leaders of the Church. The Council of Jerusalem issued its decision, with the ratification of a phrase almost incredible in its fullness, and yet natural in its simplicity: "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us." The sentence is, from one point of view, absurd; from another, quite ordinary. But it is neither; it is the serious implicit declaration by men that a union exists, a union denied, defeated, forgotten, frustrated, but, at the bottom of all, actual by a common consent. There are wild moments when anyone may find himself saying—with some truth—"It seems good to the Holy Ghost and to us." But the Church has never forgotten, though it may apostatize often, that this is the real claim towards which it must, inevitably and indefectibly, aspire, and in which, awfully, it believes: "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost"—O vision of certainty!—"and to us"—O vision of absurdity!— . . . and what? "to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things." It is the choice of necessity; it is the freedom of

all that is beyond necessity. But the analysis of that choice of necessity waited, and waits, for a farther vision, perhaps the understanding of the epistles of Paul.

The chief direct causes of the decision were the opinion of St. Peter, who declared that he had a vision of the proper method, the quite particular liberal intensity of St. Paul, and (at a later date) the destruction of Jerusalem. But these causes operated in support of an idea, and the idea was already latent in the controversy. The Christology of the Church already reposed in certain obscure and undeveloped formulæ. But this was a question, not so much of the nature of Christ, a phrase which might have seemed strange to the Apostolic Councils, as of the way in which that nature was to be regarded. Was the God-man (the phrase would not have been easy to them) to be regarded as Judaic? Or was Judaism only an accident of the God-Man? Was Manhood or Judaism to come first? The Church, or the Spirit in the Church, corrected its original misconceptions, springing from the phenomena of the human nature of Messias. Grace was to be mediated universally—to Gentile as to Jew—through all the new creation. Race had nothing whatever to do with it; rites had nothing whatever to do with it. The decision has lasted universally, in spite of any sins of individual Christians or of classes of Christians at various times. No idea, no nationality, no faith, no anything, has been allowed anywhere or at any time to interpose as a primal and necessary condition of Christianity. No personal experience, however it may have preceded or led to Christianity, has been allowed to interpose between the God-Man and the soul. All doctrine, and all doctors, have been relegated into subordination.

This result was achieved very largely by the event known as the Conversion of St. Paul. It was, in every way, a very

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remarkable event. For first, it was the beginning of that great train of conversions and illuminations which form part of the history of Christendom—Augustine, Francis, Luther, Ignatius, Wesley, and the rest. No doubt all creeds are so accompanied; this is not the place to discuss the others. Such conversions cannot be supposed to prove the truth of a creed. Second, it turned, of course, a strong opponent of the Church into a strong supporter; but here it did more—it produced a kind of microcosm of the situation. It exploded an intense Judaizer into an anti-Judaizer. It united, as it were, Paul the Jew to Paul the man, and it gave the manhood the dominating place. But also it united Paul the man with Paul the new man, and it gave the new manhood the dominating place. It did all this in a personality which possessed, with much other genius, a desire to understand and a desire to explain. In order to understand and to explain the convert produced practically a new vocabulary. To call him a poet would be perhaps improper (besides ignoring the minor but important fact that he wrote in prose). But he used words as poets do; he regenerated them. And by St. Paul's regeneration of words he gave theology first to the Christian Church.

It was not, of course, then obvious. The Epistles were not bound up together and bought for a shilling. There must have been many of the Churches that he founded who were so illiterate as not to have heard of his best purple passages. He may have changed his mind upon certain points; he certainly took into consideration other points of view. The old silly view that he contradicted Jesus Christ on every important matter and that none of the other Apostles noticed it, or that their faint objections have faded from all record, has probably vanished along with other dim myths of the simple Gospel. The one practically certain thing about the