

Chapter 3

GOD AND THE PHILOSOPHERS

(Continued)

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In any consideration we may give the foregoing tendencies and such contentions as may have been made in regard to them, it should first be observed that all this modern, monistic, idealistic thought, whether in its critical or in its theological aspects, must inevitably result in the naturalizing of the Christian faith and in the secularizing of the Christian Church. No thorough-going monistic view of life can admit of any sort of existence, or order of being, which is not subject to rational understanding and which cannot be construed in terms of nature and of man's natural powers of the lower or higher types, as understood and employed to-day. And, although Idealism recognizes a dualism as existing in this world-order and in the experience of man, it always assumes, at the same time, that there exists in the opposing factors represented in such dualism some underlying rational principle which permits a synthesis. To be able to rationalize in this way is actually to naturalize all existence, thus to secularize what is called the supernatural as essentially a part of that existence.

Most people will agree, whether they approve of it or disapprove, that a distinct naturalizing and secularizing of things pertaining to the Christian faith has taken place in modern times. Only a few years ago, a highly reputable scholar is reported to have spoken words to this effect: 'It is of the nature of Christianity to become secularized'. We may surmise that the idea which he wished to convey was this, namely, that Christianity is of such a nature that it must needs find a practical application in the concrete situations of life. However, the

necessity under which this faith, in order to fulfil its true function, must have practical effects is one thing; quite another thing, that it may legitimately become secularized. It would be correct to say that it is only because the Christian faith cannot be secularized (and at the same time remain Christian) that it alone proves itself always to be essentially and truly practical. Only that which belongs to an order other than this world can be truly provocative, and thus provide the necessary corrective for this world. A secularized Christianity becomes pitifully impotent to challenge and to change anything, owing to the fact that it has been reduced to one among other challenges of the kind already existing in the world.

Both the faith and the Church originally, and with more or less consistency throughout their respective histories, have conceived of themselves as born out of and sustained in conditions strictly miraculous. That is to say, both claim to be effects of a strictly eschatological, supernatural cause, and therefore any true interpretation we may apply to the nature of the same must of necessity begin with this as its presupposition. At least it is so, if we are to understand this Church and this faith as they understood themselves. Besides, such a procedure provides the only truly scientific means by which specific knowledge of genuine value might be attained in regard to them.

And one of the weaknesses of all purely critical New Testament investigation, despite its claim to a method purely scientific, derives from the fact that it has actually refused to be scientific, inasmuch as it has persisted in putting modern meanings into New Testament conceptions which the latter in no wise bear. The only true scientific approach is one which is determined to understand those things it investigates as they actually are, and not in terms of that which modern or other thinking might wish them to be. As a matter of fact, since, in late years, just such a truly scientific attitude has been increasingly assumed in regard to the New Testament by the most recent schools, both of criticism and theology, that book presents a picture entirely different from that to which Church people were becoming accustomed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The obvious duty of any sound critical method in regard to the Bible is that of first understanding truly what that book's normative conceptions actually signify. If the critic finds, after having done this, that biblical thought in important respects is really incompatible with his modern conceptions, then as a

student of the Word of God hidden in the Bible he should test his own conceptions in the light of what that Word seems to demand. Certainly he should not endeavour to make the Bible say what he himself had wished it might say. If sincere, it may be that he will be obliged to dismiss certain biblical conceptions as, in his opinion, obsolete. And, as a matter of fact, most psychologists, sociologists and humanists to-day have from their purely naturalistic approach felt obliged on this account to consider the Bible itself as now obsolete. If however such conceptions – those he cannot accept – are found to be in accord with the whole message of the Bible, the serious biblical critic faces alternative choices. Either he will be frank enough to acknowledge that the Bible itself has been ruled out as an important authority in modern religious thinking, or he will seriously question not only his own hypotheses but his own method of interpretation and approach. There is a sort of naive presumption inherent in books entitled, for instance, *The Significance of St. Paul for To-day*, or, *The Significance of Jesus Christ for the Modern Mind*, etc. When the scientist discovers that the facts do not support his hypothesis, he forthwith drops the hypothesis. He does not attempt to change the significance of the facts in order that these may thus support his false hypothesis. Christians, of all men, should be honest, and should be prepared to face serious alternatives. The whole ‘eschatological’ view of life, which has been so upsetting to religious modernism, represents a particular case in which Liberal criticism refuses to be consistent with itself. Nevertheless, it may be affirmed that it is now clear that any attempt to neutralize or to eradicate this ‘eschatological’ element from the New Testament is tantamount to trifling with the essential New Testament witness.

And in this connection, let me say that one of the assured results of the more advanced New Testament scholarship of this day is to be found in the affirmation that the eschatological belongs not only to the earliest authentic source-material of New Testament writings, but is characteristic and distinctive of the New Testament attitude to life itself. And it is significant that it is this same scholarship which strongly affirms that in the New Testament no such thing as an idealistic ethic exists (Bultmann); that, moreover, revelation as represented in the New Testament is not subject to scientific research at all, i.e., it is not to be discovered by the historical-critical method (Bertram). Even the Liberal critic,

Professor Goguel of the *Faculte de Theologie Protestante*, Paris, France, can boldly affirm that no sound scholarship would any longer think of eliminating eschatology from the inner thought and motive of Jesus. He writes: 'We can no longer think of eliminating eschatology from the thought of Jesus, either by neutralizing it, or by spiritualizing it as the nineteenth century so often tried to do;'¹ that 'for the purely historical, literary method, the problem of the life of Jesus is distinctly insoluble.'² Such claims, as cited above from this modern critical investigation, we believe, will not successfully be refuted by any subsequent investigation.

What both the faith and the Church witness to is a *given* from *above*, and not something in the form of an extension of the religious knowledge and achievements proceeding from a past. We can readily understand, accordingly, how utterly irreconcilable must be an interpretation based upon this Christian assumption, with the modern view in which both faith and Church and their origins have been interpreted largely in terms of the progressive, the historical and the natural, i.e., from the plane of natural cause and effect, to which, admittedly, a purely scientific empirical approach is the correct and adequate one. And it has been owing to the complete failure of Liberal scholars to perceive this important distinction that they are so loath to admit that any legitimate treatment of the Christian faith and Christian revelation must of necessity be of an essentially dogmatic character. It cannot be otherwise, however, if we are to assign any real significance to the claim of both, namely, that their origins are never to be found in human reason or history, but in that which transcends them.

A fresh realization altogether, however, of the distinctive nature of the claim of Christianity has, in more recent days, been causing men to rebel against a God who has been categorized with the ideal aspect of man's nature, and against a Church calculated to become, and indeed already become in some quarters, scarcely more than an educational, social and humanitarian institution, and therefore a particular instrument among others for preserving decency, order and peace in society. But it is not so clearly seen as yet that that against which they are beginning to protest, both in regard to the Church and to God, represents but the practical effect of an interpretation of Christian faith and revelation from the purely empirical, progressive, historical standpoint. If there is one thing concerning which we may be confident and emphatic to-

day, it is that revelation and faith, as well as 'incarnation', 'atoning death', 'resurrection', 'reconciliation' and 'redemption', yea, 'Kingdom of God' and 'Holy Spirit' and 'Church' belong strictly to that category of thinking which has been called eschatological. And it is this fact which affords all of these conceptions the radical distinctiveness and the radical challenge which always rightly belong to them. When this eschatological element is permitted to remain quiescent, both faith and Church lose their peculiar pertinence in this world and cease to have weight among men.

Not a little disconcerting is it to-day, then, to find that the critical-historical idealistic scholars of the late nineteenth century might have learned profoundly from their contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), whom many of them had labelled as a sort of anti-Christ, - without, it would appear, so far as not a few English scholars at any rate are concerned, really having read his works. They had trusted to the admonitions of Nietzsche's continental critics, themselves representatives of that 'philistine-culture' which this intrepid thinker had subjected to such devastating contempt and ridicule. Doubtless, too, there was certain justice in their claim in regard to Nietzsche, though not for the particular reasons they had advanced. He was the arch-Humanist, who, could these scholars have perceived it, constituted the logical reaction, in a rather strained fashion perhaps, against the religio-secular emphasis adopted and maintained by themselves. Nietzsche clearly discerned the degeneracy and the sterility to which a purely 'historical' culture must inevitably lead. But the 'scholars' possessed little of Nietzsche's wit, and much less, one would say, of his passion and courage.

As Adrian Collins³ observes: 'With Nietzsche the historical sense became a malady from which men suffer, the world-process an illusion, evolutionary theories a subtle excuse for inactivity.' . . . 'History', for Nietzsche, 'had no meaning except as the servant of life and action,' and was never to be employed with a purpose simply to 'use the past to justify the present'. Nietzsche himself maintains in this volume that: 'History, so far as it serves life, serves an unhistorical power', and that, 'by an excess of history, life becomes maimed and degenerate and is followed by the degeneration of history as well.' (P 16.) Such were some of the thoughts which governed his views upon what he conceived to be the nineteenth century abuse of history in general.

And, although latterly an avowed enemy of Christ, he is not less specific, in this earlier period, in his criticism of history and historicisms as these had been applied to the Christian faith. He conceived far more clearly than the Christian theologians of his day the radical nature of the claim essential Christianity had made for Christ. And his ironical estimate of the meagre claim of modern critical and philosophic scholarship on behalf of the Christianity it professed to believe in,⁴ and the consequence such claim must have on the minds of those dependent upon this scholarship, is scarcely to be improved upon and is worthy of reproduction here.

Referring, first, to his view of historical-criticism, as early as 1874, he wrote: 'Christianity has been denaturalised by historical treatment – which in its most complete form means, 'just' treatment – until it has been resolved into pure knowledge and destroyed in the process.' When thinking of the influence of philosophy on Christianity he has this to say: 'This state of innocence may be continued for some time by Hegelian philosophy – still seething in some of the older heads – by which man can distinguish the 'idea of Christianity' from its various 'imperfect manifestations'; and persuade themselves it is the 'self-movement of the idea' that is ever particularizing itself in purer and purer forms, and at last becomes the purest, most transparent, in fact, scarcely visible form, in the brain of the present *theologus liberalis vulgaris*. But listen to this pure Christianity speaking its mind about the earlier impure Christianity; the uninitiated hearer would often get the impression that the talk was not of Christianity at all but of – what are we to think? If we find Christianity described by the greatest theologians of the century as 'the religion that claims to find itself in all real religions, and some other barely possible religions,' and if the 'true Church' is a thing which may become a liquid mass with no fixed outline, with no fixed place for its different parts, but everything to be peacefully welded together' – what, I ask again, are we to think?'⁵

It would be truly difficult to find anywhere a better description of what has taken place in Christianity since the time of Hegel and Schleiermacher, and what has happened to Christianity at the hands of the apologists and the historic-critics. It supplies, too, a real commentary upon those who in face of the difficulties confronting Protestantism at the present moment have set themselves to achieve, by any or every means, what they like to call the 'ecumenical mind' – this ostensibly to save the

Church, at any price it would seem, in the midst of conditions which to many appear as the rapid dissolving of Protestantism into a conglomeration of atomistic sects. Widening – in almost medieval manner, but without any absolute norm for which the Catholic Church then contended – their conception of Christianity to include practically everything that at one time or another has featured Christian thought and practice, besides much indeed that patently has originated from pagan thought, they strive, in purely prudential fashion, to form a unity of Protestant Churches and to discover a corresponding suitable ‘manual of common theology’, sufficiently diverse, and they trust sufficiently strong and powerful, to meet successfully the present ‘menaces’ to Christianity arising out of modern secularism and the so-called ‘new religions’, Communism and Nazi-ism. All well-meaning enough, but who indeed supposes, except perhaps the ‘ecclesiastics’ themselves, that anything of vital importance to the Christian faith or to those who would revive it will eventuate from such endeavours? Christianity did not emerge from a synthesis and it is not likely to be restored by a synthetic process. Indeed history, in the times of the decay of civilizations, affords abundant examples of attempts at syncretistic religious rehabilitations which have been anything but fruitful experiments. Perhaps we may assume therefore in our present time, that God Himself is really not so concerned to preserve the Church and the Christianity which happen to exist, as are some of the ecclesiastics. Christians will scarcely succeed in saving the Church if indeed the Church does not first save them. And the Church is of God, not of man.

The significant thing however is, that, underlying all this effort, there is assumed an interpretation of the Christian faith which would much better fit the great ethnic religions. G. Foote Moore, some years ago, had described Hinduism, at the end of its development, as an ‘amorphous conglomeration of heterogeneous elements’. A similar description might almost equally well be applied to the final developments of the Persian, Greek and Mohammedan religious systems. Indeed this tendency to assimilate opposites, aberrations, idiosyncracies, and what not, represents the distinctive mark of religions in the course of their development. It is this fact, however, which places all such religions in strict contrast with revelation. Christianity is the revelation of God to man and because of that fact it stands in antithesis to, and therefore

in a true sense is the negation of, all religions. The true significance of the latter is to be found in the fact that they represent man's searchings after God, and searchings are as various and composite as the supposed needs of man in the passing conditions of time. The significance of Christianity is that it represents God's one manifestation of Himself to man. It represents His declaration of His Name, a Name which men by searching could never find out. And the all-important thing to observe is that this declaration of His Name is made concretely in the 'Word become flesh' alone. In revelation God particularizes Himself in an event which is exclusive and unique, that is to say, God reveals Himself, not in general history, but in concrete events in history.

Liberal Protestant ecclesiastics to-day, with an apparent air of having discovered something new, and yet also in a kind of desperation, are almost feverishly affirming that 'the greatness of the Christian religion is to be found, not in its uniqueness, but rather in its all-inclusive character'. This is a new idea for Protestantism. It finds utterance, of course, mainly among those who are infected by a new religious amalgam in which Liberalism and Ecclesiasticism, so-called, are attempting a rapprochement. The curious irony of this age, in so far as religion is concerned, is to be perceived in the fact that Liberalism is wooing tradition and is becoming increasingly dogmatic and intolerant. To those who truly understand systems of religious thought and have perceived the curious vagaries of the history of Christianity, the reason for this sudden movement of Liberalism toward Ecclesiasticism is patent. It represents a last refuge for the theological vagabondage which characterized the Liberalism of the nineteenth century. A debilitated Liberalism would thus find some safeguard from the terrific challenge and judgment of this age within the precincts of a synthetic ecclesiasticism. But in the end this will prove to be a pseudo-ecclesiasticism. A true and powerful consciousness of the Church never derives from a sense of fear, nor from anything in the form of prudential or selfish interests. A true ecclesiasticism can arise only where faith has become strong again, because the very Word of God is upon men, in which condition theology inevitably becomes the paramount Christian interest.

Be that as it may, a loyal devotee of Hinduism could sincerely say, and indeed is saying at present, this very thing about his religion, namely, that it is an all-inclusive religion, in fact, that

it can transfigure and transform all alien elements it has adopted and in such a manner as to make them truly Hindu. The Hindu honestly believes that his religious system has truly succeeded in assimilating all the various elements of religious thought and practice which have appeared in the whole history of India. Not only that, he believes that it can as truly assimilate in its Mahayana-Buddhistic counterpart all that is characteristic of Catholic Christianity and in its own Bhakti forms all that is of moral and religious value in the characteristic Protestant types of Christianity; furthermore, that it can quite as readily assimilate all that is significant of the 'sublime religious Christian Teacher, Jesus,' whom Hindus, if we are to credit Stanley Jones and others, have come to respect as highly, if not more highly than their own Gurus (holy men). In fact, no religion has been more successful than this modern Hinduism in acquiring an all-inclusive character and in accommodating itself to all other types of religious thought with which it has come in contact.

It is most unfortunate, moreover, for this assumed originality of the present-day Protestant that we are obliged to recognize that the Roman Catholic Church has been saying or implying for centuries, with a view to defending its own peculiar ecclesiastical claims and character, precisely that for which our Liberal Protestants at this late date are so busy contending.

The truth, however, is (and it cannot be said too provocatively) that what utterly distinguishes revelation from religions as such, and, therefore, constitutes the greatness of the Christian faith, is precisely its *uniqueness*, therefore its utter exclusiveness, its definiteness and determinateness, its inevitable discrimination and differentiation and the absolute nature, the personal concreteness, of its challenge.

'Amorphous conglomerations', whether pagan or Christian, just because they include all things, appeal to all religious men and to all religious moods, but for the same reason just as truly challenge none of them. In fact an all-inclusive faith is no faith at all. It is a formless and characterless thing as Nietzsche implies. And the pertinence and reality of the Christian faith is precisely in inverse ratio to the breadth of its appeal.

Here, then, we may perceive in some perspective the practical effect of the philosophizing of the Christian faith which has been taking place in modern times, and the subjecting of revelation to a

theory of progress which happens to have been a popular feature of the particular ideology of last century. In an earlier time such an aberration from the Christian faith would have deserved the ugly name apostasy. Over half a century ago, the 'impossible' Nietzsche was alone in perceiving the significance of that trend of thought in which a merely critical-historical treatment of the Bible was to have baffling effects, and in which, through a naturalizing of the distinctive Christian claims, Christian faith and Christian theology were to lose any fundamentally radical challenge they possessed: 'Recent theology', said Nietzsche at the time, 'seems to have entered quite innocently into a partnership with history, and scarcely sees, even now, that it has unwittingly bound itself to the Voltairean *ecrasez*'.⁶ Already Christianity was being considered as a religion among other religions, a view of life among other views, a system of thought to be conditioned, augmented and supported by the philosophic systems of thought; all of which constituted a clear invitation to make Christianity something relative to the progression of thought itself, rather than an absolute in which alone it could maintain its distinctive authority.

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Now it is in opposition to this entire treatment of things. Christian, in which the *sui generis* character of the Christian revelation has, in one way or another, tended to dissolve under the corroding influence of human rational thought, that there has emerged to-day a vigorous reaction in the form of a revived Protestantism. This Protestantism today (as in the case of the original Protestantism, in the utter antipathy of the latter to Roman Catholic rational scholasticism which was believed by the Reformers to have compromised Christian revelation) is a vehement protest against a view of God made in conformity with what man himself desires God to be, as well as against a view of revelation which is supposed to satisfy his human reason, and against a conception of redemption which meets what his own estimate of his needs demands. Which is just to say, that it represents a protest on behalf of God Who *has made Himself known*; and known in that way alone of which the record is in the Christian Bible; – in the Old Testament for instance, in words which Etienne Gilson rightly believes distinguishes the Old Testament conception of God, but which, curiously enough, he believes to represent an Old Testament 'metaphysic of Being'.