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THE INDIANIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY

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In Christianizing the Hellenic world of the first few Christian centuries, Christianity became pretty largely Hellenized, especially in its apologetic and dogmatic formulas. Fortunately for the Christians of Graeco-Roman culture, those who introduced them to Christianity did not introduce the new faith in the form of creeds and dogmas. The missionaries to that world were men of contagious faith and heroic adventure, whose lives were joined by vital links to Jesus Christ. Their contribution to the Hellenic world was a living religion of redemption, and not a system of theology.

But the Christianity that emerged from the Mediterranean world of the Graeco-Roman age was quite a different religion. Dr. Hatch in his *Hibbert Lectures* on the influence of Greek ideas on Christianity has lucidly unfolded the tremendous change between the Christianity of the Sermon on the Mount and the Christianity of the Nicene Creed. This difference is explicable in terms of the Hellenic social environment into which the new faith came, early in its history. It was only to be expected that the Greeks would interpret Jesus and the religion of Jesus through the media of their current religious and philosophical imagery. And it is to the everlasting credit of the Greek Fathers that their critical work was so constructive that it met the needs of the day. The question remains: Do we do them justice or do we deal justice to the constructive Christian thinking of the subsequent centuries if we attempt to make their formulations normative for all time?

There is always constructive Christian thought in process. It is psychologically necessary that such thinking be in terms of the imagery of the environment, chronological and social.

It is the glory of the Christian faith that it is always so vitalizing that strong men feel the urge to interpret its great facts, especially its greatest fact, Jesus Christ, in terms of the current philosophy of life. This is one of the reasons that its redemptive influence continues throughout the ages to suffice for peoples of varying molds of thought.

The prophets of power are those who have spoken as with the voice of God the Christian message as it related itself to a living situation. So the author of the Fourth Gospel, and Clement and Origen of Alexandria became prophets to the Hellenic civilization. So Augustine bore a prophetic message to Imperial Rome. So Anselm arose like a seer to the culture of medieval Europe. So Thomas Aquinas uttered the message for the day when Aristotelianism was revived in the latter Middle Ages. So Martin Luther became the prophet of the Reformation. So John Calvin vocalized the prophetic message for nationalistic Europe. So Horace Bushnell spoke with the prophet's voice to the dawning democratic spirit. And in the same way others are becoming prophets of the Christian life to the newly awakened social consciousness.

May we not take it as significant of the vitalizing, redemptive power of our religion that the keener minds among the converts to Christianity in countries to which the missionary has gone are jealous of a similar opportunity? The missionary is at best a stranger in a strange cultural environment. Sometimes his task takes him among people whose culture is decidedly primitive. At other times he finds himself planted on the soil of an environment with a culture with greater claims to antiquity than his own. In any case he comes among the new peoples, the heir to a wealth of social imagery that has supplied the tools for all of his past religious thinking, but which is foreign in many respects to the thought processes of his new neighbors and friends. He cannot escape the disadvantage of clothing his message in intellectual molds other than those common to his hearers. In spite of an

overwhelming desire to do full justice to the gospel which he bears, in his hands it invariably presents some aspects of a foreign religion. It is for this reason, that the missionary enterprise is increasingly being realized as the task of building up strong churches with intelligent leaders, native to the soil and the culture, so that the religion of Jesus may assume a more indigenous character everywhere.

I

Each country or social group presents problems peculiar to itself. In India one of the problems is created by the widely divided social strata of the people. It is not the mere division into the classes and the masses. Nor is it the division between capital and labor. The caste system is more than social; it is more than economic. Its roots are deeply imbedded in an ancient history, and its fibers are inextricably interwoven with religious strands. Moreover it has been traditional to confine the chief cultural advantages to those belonging to the "higher" castes, and to deny such advantages to those of the "lower" castes or to the non-caste peoples. One result is that one may find within the precincts of a single village men of culture and mental acumen and others scarcely beyond the stage of primitivity.

It is of no small significance that the majority of the converts to the Christian faith have been from the depressed and backward classes. It is not my place to discuss at this point the particular phase of Christianity that has proved most attractive to these peoples. The point to be noted is that, until they were given greater cultural advantages than they had enjoyed hitherto, they were not in a position to make much contribution to the task of rendering an Indian interpretation of their new faith. Now that we are getting to the third and fourth generation of Christians in some localities, the situation is rapidly changing. Christians, whose forefathers a few generations ago were the victims of a system

that gave them few of the advantages of education, are today graduating and graduated from the various colleges of general and technical learning throughout the land.

There is the added fact that, though less common, there is a good number of Christians from caste communities who bring with them to their adopted faith the heritage of their ancient civilization. In many cases the thought processes have been more active and the emotional element less prominent than in the case of the conversions from the backward classes. Hinduism has very little to offer the non-caste man. So when the claims of Christianity are presented, he has to choose between the traditional religion which proposes to perpetuate his disadvantages and the new faith which promises amelioration for his wrongs and a democracy of spiritual privileges. It is somewhat different with the caste man. He and his ancestors, for millenniums perhaps, have been in the enjoyment of the rights and privileges of Hinduism. When he becomes a Christian he does so because he has deliberated and reached the conclusion that the new religion has more to satisfy his felt needs than the old. The psychological process in the conversion experience of the average caste man has included more of the cognitive element than in the experience of the average non-caste man.

My personal observation is that Indian leadership is decidedly more prominent in the Indian church than it was when I first came to India fourteen years ago. And I may add that Indian Christians have grown immensely in the capacity for leadership during these years. This is as it should be. It indicates the dawning of the day when the Indian people will lead not simply in the formal matters of church government, liturgy, and ceremonial, but also in the more spiritual affairs of interpretation and evaluation. Already some of the leaders are impatient for the withdrawal of foreign influence in the person of the missionary. And the wisdom of the mission societies is being evidenced where

they are studying the most practical and serviceable ways of giving the Indian church a larger share in the control and direction of Christian propagandism. It is not enough that the foreign influence should formulate plans and provide the money, inviting the Indian to help carry the schemes to fruition. He must be given an increasing share in the formulation of the plans which he is invited to realize.

II

The Christianizing of India will involve an Indianizing of Christianity, as surely as the Christianizing of the Graeco-Roman world involved the Hellenizing of Christianity. It is undeniable that India has as much right to interpret the world and to interpret Jesus as Hellenism had. The truth is that India is going to make her own interpretations whether the West likes or dislikes it. Surely Western Christendom should welcome the process as the harbinger of a day of larger significance for Jesus to the life and culture of the Orient.

We must all admit that the experience of God in human life, the consciousness of moral delinquency, the realization of salvation, and the redemptive influence of Jesus are facts too large to be confined within the logical categories of any human group. It is not a token of decadence but a sign of vitality that men are continually making new statements, new interpretations, and new evaluations in terms of the prevailing social consciousness. It is because Christianity is a religion of redemption and not simply a philosophy of religion or a system of dogma that men are never content to accept someone else's theory as doing justice to their own experiences. The reality of the matter is that all of these facts are transcendent facts, refusing to be confined to any definitions or theories, be they never so logically devised. The best that we can bring of mental as well as spiritual vigor to the task of realizing the meaning and worth of Jesus is all too little honor for that peerless life which we would proclaim as the world's Redeemer.

The psychology of the Indian religious consciousness is not easy for the West to appreciate. The imagery with which the thought processes of the Indian people proceed is so different from that of Westerners that we do not realize its significance without years of observation and study, and even then not fully. For this reason it is imperative for the future of the Christian religion that its presentation be by Indians for Indians.

1. In the first place the Indian mind responds more readily to parables than to syllogisms. Even the philosophic arguments abound in similes and metaphors. To many of the people an apt illustration is much more convincing and constitutes a more valid proof than any logical or mathematical deductions. For that reason the man with a ready wit in drawing parallels, which appeal as symbolic of the case that he is attempting to establish, is likely to be more successful in gaining assent to his arguments than one who proceeds in cold logic from premise to conclusion.

It is only necessary to be reminded of one or two of the most common similes to appreciate this phase of the Indian consciousness. One of the more frequent figures is stated somewhat thus: As all rivers flow eventually into the ocean, so all religions have their common goal in God. This is the usual method of evading the question of deciding between the relative merits of two religions. With others it is a sincere conviction that it matters not what one's religion may be, all of them being varying modes of worshiping the one God.

Another simile which is to be found frequently in the philosophic literature is one that is used in connection with the doctrine of *māyā* or illusion. This doctrine is a tenet of the monistic Vedantism of Sankaracharya the leading school of philosophy among Indian thinkers today. It teaches the identity of the individual soul (*ātman*) with the world-soul (*brāhman*), and claims that the sense of the plurality of phenomena is only illusory. The simile is stated somewhat as

follows: The perception of the not-self as distinct from the self is an illusion by virtue of ignorance, just as a man walking in the dark sees a rope and thinks it to be a snake. Sankara puts it: "Just as, by illusion, one ignores the rope and perceives the serpent, so does he of deluded intellect perceive the universe without realizing the truth."

Illustrations of this kind might be multiplied by references to the literature of India. They are of a piece with a poetic temperament which is quite characteristic of the people. The mines of poetic lore are only beginning to be explored by the world at large. There is not only the Sanskrit literature, but the Pali, and the literatures of the many vernaculars which abound in thoughts, mostly religious and largely poetic. Nor is the tendency confined to the past. It is in evidence very conspicuously among the thoughtful people of the present day.

2. In the second place, the Indian mind responds more readily to the idealistic than to the empirical method of thought. That is to say, there is a stronger tendency to posit a philosophy of life on the basis of a carefully reasoned system, than to find one's way to it through the maze of experience. That is not to say that there have not been and are not empiricists among Indian philosophers. The suggestion is rather that idealism is preponderant.

There are six systems of philosophy that may lay claim to orthodoxy. On the other hand there were two systems evolved which were regarded as heretical, and these developed in time into distinct religions, viz., Buddhism and Jainism. Of all these, the one system which is most empirical—Buddhism—is a heresy. As has been already indicated, the system which has won the largest number of followers is Vedantism, and that especially in the form of monistic idealism as outlined by Sankara.

The language adopted by many of the educated community, when using English as a medium of expression, is the language of idealism. God is spoken of as the Absolute, the Eternal

Being, the Infinite Being, the Imperishable, the Soul of the Universe, etc. Then all gods are spoken of as many manifestations of the universal Soul. And all religions are modes of worship and service directed to the Infinite.

The picture of man is also more idealistic than scientific. The results of anthropology and kindred sciences which give us the story of the human race from lowly cultural beginnings, and the progress made toward civilization are neglected or ignored. The Vedantic idealist portrays the history of mankind as one of regress instead of progress, the ideal man and the ideal caste being the Brahman of Indian lore, conceived in terms of unworldliness and divine wisdom. The salvation of the Hindu race or indeed of the world thus consists in the realization of the divinity within the soul of the individual.

These illustrations of the idealistic trend of thought indicate one phase of the Indian philosophic and religious temperament. The problem is yet open for solution: Is it possible to accomplish a synthesis of Christianity and Indian philosophic thought, even as Thomas Aquinas did in the case of Aristotelianism and the Christian faith?

3. A third observation in regard to the Indian religious consciousness is that it is inclined to be mystical and contemplative. The ideal of mysticism is a life of ineffable communion with or union with God. In pantheistic systems such as we find in Brahmanism and Buddhism, this communion with God usually is interpreted by the idea of absorption. In Brahmanic philosophy there is no thought more prevalent than the idea of the absorption (*samādhi*) of the individual soul (*ātman*) in the cosmic soul (*brāhman*). This is the goal of all striving, the *sine qua non* for the attainment of bliss (*moksha*). The philosophies of religion are interested in how the obstacles to that end are to be overcome, and the possible means of fulfilling that aim.

Now the Hindu position in regard to redemption is embodied in the desire for release from *karma* and *samsāra*

(metempsychosis). The various schemes for attaining salvation all have for their ultimate aim the release from transmigration through the overcoming of *karma*. The mystical element comes to the fore in the *yoga mārṅa* or way of asceticism. The word "yoga" means yoking, and refers to steadfast contemplation (*dhyāna*) by the mind on things mystical or divine, as e.g., on the mystic syllable, *Om*. It encourages bodily asceticism (*tapas*), suggesting either abstention from works or else the performance of works without any thought of a possible reward.

This doctrine is largely responsible for the large number of religious mendicants that are to be found throughout India. The ascetic ideal is one which gains very ready honor among the Indian peoples. Even this summary statement of the *yoga* doctrine should serve as an explanation of the fact. Many of the most saintly characters have been ascetics so that Indian religious history abounds in names that all have been taught to hold in reverence, if not to worship.

III

Can the gospel of Jesus Christ be interpreted so as to appeal to the Indian consciousness? Is it possible to form a compact between Christianity and the social mind of India? That is the problem that besets the representatives of the Christian faith in India. We must lament that as yet no great progress has been made in that direction. But the fact that the need for such service is being felt, especially by the Indian Christian leadership of today, is promising for some constructive attempts in the near future.

One expression of Indianized Christianity is to be seen in the South Indian United Church, in which the Christians of several Protestant bodies have formed an organic union. The fact that even the Episcopal and Syrian Christian bodies are willing to discuss plans whereby they would unite with other churches is evidence of the fact that the Indian church

would have little mind to perpetuate the denominational distinctions of Western Christianity, if the latter influence were withdrawn.

Another expression of Christianity in an Indian garb is seen in the Christian Sadhu movement. Here we witness the attempt to link the Christian life to the *yoga* ideal. Its most outstanding example is seen in the person of Sadhu Sunder Singh, the Christian Sadhu who is so well known and loved in India, because he expresses the religion of Jesus after the Indian ideal of a holy life. His recent visits to England and America have given those lands an opportunity to appreciate Indian idealism.

The needs of today in this direction are profound. There is need for poets who will give the Indian church a hymnology that will be both Indian and Christian. There is need for artists who will interpret Christianity in music and painting in accordance with Indian ideals. There is need for architects who will give the Indian church a temple for social worship, both Indian and Christian. There is need for men of thought and piety to develop a liturgy both Indian and Christian. And finally there is need for men of learning and Christian experience to give to India an interpretation of Christianity in the social imagery of the land. In the words of the editor of the *Christian Patriot*, an Indian Christian journal:

If we desire to commend Christianity to India, we must have at the back of it a new Christian experience, as new as St. Paul's was to the Apostolic Church, and possibly as militant. This red-hot experience must be cast into the moulds fashioned by the genius of India during the ages, kept ready for use in the religious and metaphysical speculations of our spiritual ancestors whose blood runs in our veins. Then only will the Great Lord be satisfied with the true Gitanjili of His bhaktas in this land.