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978-1-107-62357-6 - The Christian Religion and its Competitors To-Day
A. C. Bouquet
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THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION AND ITS COMPETITORS TO-DAY

LECTURE I

INTRODUCTION

THE subject of these lectures is "The Christian Religion and its competitors to-day."

Rivalry may seem to imply antagonism, and I can therefore imagine one of the numerous believers in universal tolerance exclaiming, not without irritation: "Here is again a case of the odious Christian engaged in attacking other religions than his own." I can assure such an objector that I do not believe in universal tolerance any more than he does, although as an upholder of freedom of thought and opinion I do not wish to send him to the stake for calling me an odious Christian. His attitude of easy indifference to truth I cannot praise, and I propose to attack it with all the earnestness of argument at my disposal. For the moment, however, he may rest, and we will make our beginning by setting down the following facts, which the more thoughtful individual will readily accept.

Homo Sapiens, as he looks back over the development of his career upon this planet, observes that among other features he has evolved the sense of what has been called a "felt practical relationship with what is believed in as a super-human being or beings."(1) This sense has guided him to some of his greatest achievements, and on the whole he values

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it. He finds it difficult to believe with thinkers like Jung (2) and Simmel (3) that it is a reaction towards an imaginary being, "a mere psychological function of an irrational nature," since in normal cases it shows no association with insanity, and is rich in positive fruits (4); and he declines to draw generalisations from abnormal cases of psychopathology. Nevertheless this sense is a delicate one, in its intenser forms very unequally distributed, easily repressed and even extinguished, and only capable of growth and endurance after much care and training. It is indeed like a precious flower growing up amid the traffic of some public highway, always in peril of being trodden down and crushed out of existence.

In the world of to-day, fraught with a multitude of changes, thoughtful persons will wish to take stock and to discover where religion stands in the face of secularism, and if it still stands, from what system of faith and practice they may reasonably hope for guidance in facing the future. Can the Christian system still offer them all that they need or will ever need?

I make some small apology for seeming to be an enthusiast for religion in an atmosphere which is noted for its sobriety and reserve. Religious interest is as much a part of my personal as Shakespeare is of our common heritage. My father's family, if you can forgive the reference, left their native land for conscience sake, and the churchwarden's staff has seldom departed from between the feet of my maternal forbears, who seem as London citizens to

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have produced not only a pious tailor, one John Stow of Cornhill, who gave up his business to write history in the days of Queen Elizabeth, but also an undistinguished Dean of St Paul's when Henry IV was King. The interest is therefore hereditary, and I cannot cut it out of my life. To anyone here present who shares not the same experience and thinks me prejudiced, I tender such expressions of regret as may seem due.

The fortunes of peace and war have caused your lecturer to temper his academic studies with a rather larger degree than is usual of pastoral and practical experience. He is proud and glad to have done so, since the materials for any real view of the significance of religion lie as much in the lives of men and women as in books. Books, it is true, recall and crystallise the experiences, testimonies and reflections of living persons, and serve to diffuse and transmit the reasonings and speculations of original thinkers, but no one who has explored the alcoves of the Cockerell building can doubt that most books about religion are but ephemeral things, and that eight out of every ten, even of the best, contribute but meagrely to our understanding of the wonder and splendour and mystery of the spiritual life. The great mass of mankind are indeed the living epistles of God. In their struggles and experiences may be read His purpose and His character. There are in one sense no ordinary people. Each individual is fresh and distinct. A system of doctrine framed wholly in terms of the divinity school or theological college must inevitably prove as inadequate as

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abstract theories of science woven independently of the laboratories of Downing Street. Just as in the medical profession the real training for a specialist lies in the handling and observation of as many cases as possible, so I believe the best part of the training of a specialist in religion consists in the personal handling and observation of as great a variety as possible of cases of religious experience. I doubt the value of questionnaires as compared with the knowledge gained from a pastoral career, and I am not ashamed to confess that my interest in Christianity is in a living and creative religion actually at work building the character of individuals, still expanding, still developing, still making history—for such it certainly is.

The limitations of space and time plainly preclude a lengthy treatment of any subject, and seem almost to invite a detailed essay covering only a little ground. But there are serious objections to the adoption of this course. The appeal of a detailed essay is likely to be limited, and signs are not absent that a lecturer on this foundation is expected to keep in view a wider circle than would be affected by a highly technical treatise, and a larger and less learned audience than frequents university sermons.

It seems best, therefore, to try to give a connected account of the modern case for religion, and of the reasons why among our younger generation there are those who wage an offensive for the spiritual supremacy of Jesus of Nazareth with renewed passion and enthusiasm. I ask your prayers that what is said may be uttered in a spirit of charity and reasonable humility.

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Spiritual values, as we have already had reason to remark, are compelled to struggle for their existence.

Four main alternatives are offered to our world to-day, and it will be our task to consider each of them in turn.

1. In the first place, there is secularism, or no religion at all.

2. In the second place, there is pantheism, or God everywhere, so that the individual soul becomes an illusion, or at any rate ceases to be ultimate, while the course of history does not count.

3. In the third place, there is traditionalism, or a steady reversion to popular paganism under a Christian veneer.

4. In the fourth place, there is relativism, or the rejection of any positive creed as final, on the ground that religious truth is still polymorphous, so that the absolute religion lies hid deep in the womb of the infinite future.

Let us analyse each of these in turn and see what it has to offer, and try to estimate its value.

SECULARISM

The word secularism was, I believe, coined in 1851 by George Jacob Holyoake, to describe his own neutral and agnostic system of thought and practice in order to distinguish it from the rampant atheism of Bradlaugh. To-day, however, we apply it more loosely to describe a group of widely differing organised movements or vague tendencies, all of which

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emphasise the finite and concrete world or saeculum, and ignore the possible existence of the spiritual or infinite. The best motto to describe all these is that of the French encyclopaedist: "La question de Dieu manque d'actualité," but of course their main idea is at least as old as the Psalm in which we read of "The foolish body who said 'there is no God.'"

There are various paths by which this attitude is reached, and they deserve some notice.

It is the fashion to-day to speak of the religious consciousness as either the working of a single faculty, or the alignment of the total number of human faculties upon the most important element in man's environment, and to say that man is a religious animal, or more correctly is capable of becoming a religious animal. Attention is concentrated by psychologists upon the expression of the religious emotions, the reason, and the will, as testifying to the felt presence of the Divine. Man is able to establish contact and relationship with point after point in his environment, and in that environment the highest point is said to be God.

"Man," it has been said, (5) "is placed in a real environment, not an imaginary one. If there was no Being in man's environment to which the conception of God in some measure corresponded, man would not best succeed in adjusting himself to his environment by belief in God. Such a belief as this would be entirely quixotic in its effects....But the opposite is the fact. Therefore there is a God": and again the late Mr Bernard Bosanquet says (6): "The instinctive appetite or demand for God...is a proof

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of the reality of Deity, in the same sort of sense in which hunger is a proof of the existence of food, or the sexual impulse proof of the existence of possible mates. Of course obvious exceptions take place: you may starve; you may die unmated. But *in rerum natura* an instinct implies an object; and if you find a special emotional impulse, such as that of worship and religion, which pervades all sorts of particular experiences, but maintains its unique suggestions and demand throughout them all, you can hardly help recognising the object of this emotion as at least some peculiar feature of the world."

When we give our attention to these matters we cannot fail to observe that there are a number of curious lapses in the working of the religious consciousness.

It is probably true, as Mr Bernard Shaw says (in the preface to *Androcles*), that mankind may be divided into three classes: the keenly religious at one extreme, the anti-religious at the other, and the indifferent between the two. In the central mass, to which the majority of persons belong, the God-consciousness is very dim, and almost entirely unused except at rare intervals.

The commonest cause of secularism is the existence of competing interests in life. Man, as Baron Friedrich von Hügel quaintly reminds us, begins by being a "land animal," (7) whatever he may afterwards become. Perhaps we like better Dean Beeching's poetic conception of the boy as

> Nimble and light of limb
> In three elements free
> To run, to ride, to swim.

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(If the poet had lived longer he would doubtless have mended his verse to work in a fourth.) Anyhow the main interests are eating, sleeping, falling in love, fighting, marrying, getting the better of your neighbour, hunting, ranging about the earth, and working off spare energy in some form of play.

From time to time however a new element appears, whether it be a mild form of mystical experience, or a glimmering of the moral consciousness. It is easy for such a new element to be swamped by its fellows, and it can only maintain its footing by one of two devices. It may either drive the other interests completely into the background, and entirely dominate life, or it may inter-penetrate the other interests, moulding and transforming them as it does so. The former device may be said to adopt the vertical and the latter the horizontal arrangement of life. The vertical arrangement acquiesces in the existence of many interests, and is prepared to confine the practice of religion to persons of a particular temperament. The horizontal arrangement involves the recognition that the whole of human life deserves a religious alignment, and would link a religious motive to almost every human interest or activity. It will be clear at once that the vertical or departmental arrangement ends logically in the career of the monk or nun, so that those who adopt the secular career simply practise their religion by proxy or ignore it altogether. The horizontal arrangement, while admittedly more attractive, runs the risk of bringing religion into every department of life, but at the price of lowering its standard.

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The history of religion both in public and private provides a series of illustrations of the fluctuation between these two courses of action. One of the puzzles that the psychologist does not yet seem to have finished studying is that which is presented by the phenomenon of a great and, as it would seem, compelling interest first of all becoming central in the life of a human being, and then more or less gradually moving away and ceasing to be central.

The problem is not altogether one of religion. It may be compared with the fact that large sections of human society live in a state of more or less permanent dissociation from things of which there is no reason to doubt the value, truth, or beauty. Absence of an aesthetic sense is very widespread. Many savages as well as many civilised persons have no appreciation of a fine landscape, and do not care for flowers. The respect due to natural scenery is not to be taken for granted. The instinct to make kitchen-middens is deep rooted in humanity, and it remains yet to be seen whether a really democratic government can protect any country-side from disfigurement and pollution. (Attempts up to the present, whether made at Versailles or in Richmond Park, seem to have been a failure.) A taste for music, painting and good literature is, oddly enough, much less freely distributed than the impulse to worship. Truth and accuracy, cleanliness and a devotion to hygiene are unhappily still absent from the lives of the majority of the two-legged humans who cluster upon this rolling sphere. Political indifference is really quite as great as religious

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indifference. Lord Bryce in his survey of Modern Democracies (8) seems to view their future in a twilight of misgiving because he cannot feel confident that their citizens will remain interested enough in the institutions they have acquired to work them honestly and well. Thus, for example, in the General Election of 1918 a large South-London division, with a register of 37,322, only sent 29 per cent. of its electors to the poll, while in 600 constituencies only 58 per cent. of the total votes were polled. And this was a Victory Election, which was intended to present the ministers who had carried the country through her trials with a vote of confidence and of gratitude. To pursue this line of argument: In the General Election of last year there was a heavy average poll, somewhere about 72 per cent., but this is, I believe, a high record, and is on a par with Church attendance at a Harvest Thanksgiving or a Friendly Societies' parade, and in any case some 6,000,000 persons did not trouble to vote. In the French elections of 1906, out of about eleven and a half millions of electors, over six millions did not trouble to record their votes. The recent heavy polling in England is again exceptional, and in municipal elections the interest rarely rises beyond the point of bringing 25 per cent. of electors to the poll. A conference in South-London was recently organised to discuss problems of juvenile unemployment with parents. Leaders of all three political parties were present, and 5000 invitations were issued to ordinary citizens, but only thirty attended!

It is beyond dispute that human beings seldom

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