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Christianity  
and Ethics

BY

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## Christianity and Social Ethics

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The whirligig of time brings many changes. Time was when Christianity imposed rules upon mankind, and in the plentitude of its power decided what should or should not be permitted to exist. Today thinkers are no longer under the necessity of proving that their teachings are in harmony with religion; it is Christianity that feels called upon to show that its teachings are in agreement with established truth. The support of a scientific name is angled for, fought for, and when obtained advertised with the persistence of a quack medicine vendor advertising his cures. Contemporary Christianity not only craves the assistance of forms of thought which it denounced as born of the devil and tried its hardest to suppress, but every passing mental fashion, every social movement or political agitation—provided it commands a fair measure of public support—finds Christian organisations ready with expressions of friendship and promises of support.

It is, therefore, only to be expected that as there is to-day less faith and interest in religious questions, and more concern for social and humanitarian ones, the attitude of church and chapel should undergo a corresponding change. Purely religious doctrines are kept discreetly in the background, those bearing a social aspect are brought to the front, and the public is informed, sometimes by inuendo, sometimes by direct statement, that the social betterment of the people is the prime, if not the only concern of genuine Christianity. Instead of being openly taught, purely religious beliefs are implied or suggested. Vague texts that may be anything, everything, or nothing are cited. Professions of good will, such as no system, secular or religious, is without, are produced as authoritative endorse-

ments of the most definite of modern social theories. Above all, the name of Jesus is kept constantly to the fore. On the strength of a handful of moral commonplaces—all perfectly familiar to the people of his day—he is accounted the greatest of social reformers. That he seized upon a little child as an illustration of the type of mind necessary to gain eternal felicity in the next world, is proof positive of his profound care for children in this. His preaching to the poor—although there is no evidence that the poor were specially selected—is proof of his deep concern for their social welfare. His obvious belief in the approaching end of the world—a belief shared by his immediate followers—is made to mean the redress of social and political injustice only. His dependence upon supernatural methods of help, supernatural methods of curing disease, and the fact that once eliminate the supernatural there is no reason whatever for his existence, all these considerations are slurred over or their relevancy flatly denied. And so by eliminating objectionable aspects and over emphasising favourable ones, by ignoring all the circumstances of time, place, and culture, a poor Jewish peasant is transformed into the ideal leader of modern social reform. No other person is treated in such a manner, and if any were, there is hardly one who could not be elevated to the same pinnacle of excellence.

In spite, however, of such apologetic tactics, the conviction that purely Christian morality is at best inadequate, and at worst dangerous, steadily gains strength. And this conviction is really more inimical to Christianity than would be an equally widespread conviction of its falsity. For the average person will more easily tolerate a false teaching than a palpably dangerous one. Thousands of people give Christianity their support because they believe it to be socially useful, not because they have a conviction that its teachings embody any vital truth. Meanwhile it is the developing moral consciousness of the public that is testing Christianity most severely. That we no longer hear

from the pulpits so much of the cruder and more brutal Christian teachings is due in part to the sustained criticism of recent years; but something is also due to the fact that people are outgrowing such teachings, and that were they now generally preached, congregations would be filled with contemptuous pity or sheer disgust. To evade the intellectual attack apologists have talked largely of Christianity's ethical value, and of the "moral homage to Christ." And now that the public at large is beginning to have doubts upon this point, the end would seem to be approaching with rapid steps.

What are the objections that may be properly raised against Christianity from the standpoint of a sane social morality?

They may be stated as follows :—

Christianity is "a negative or ascetic ideal, and cannot therefore be the true ideal of such a being as man in such a world as this. It not merely invalidates the instincts and interests of the healthy-minded man, it further degrades and enslaves the human spirit itself, and paralyses, instead of stimulating its highest powers. Its morality is not merely lacking in virility and strength; it destroys the virile qualities in human nature, and substitutes servility and cowardice for the masterfulness and courage which are inseparable from strength of purpose and self-respect and its anti-social tendencies which make it impossible to construct any social order in accordance with its principles."

Asceticism is not a transient phenomenon in Christian history; it is more or less constant, and such a general phenomenon must be attributed to more than a mere accident.

Asceticism is so deeply embedded in Christianity that all the efforts of the churches have never yet been able to suppress it. Its ideal figure, Jesus, was a celibate. His

great disciple, Paul, declared that it was better to remain unmarried than to marry, and only sanctioned marriage for the lowest of reasons. In heaven there was to be neither marriage nor giving in marriage (Matt. xxii., 30), a teaching emphasized by the writer of Revelations, who saw 144,000 around the Throne, all virgins (Rev. xiv., 3); while the saying of Jesus (Matt. xix., 12) bore its fruit in the practice of self-mutilation among some of the Christians of the early centuries. Asceticism was deliberately taught by the early Christian fathers as the most desirable state. Denunciation of "worldly pleasures," and the duty of mortifying the flesh, has been one of the stock features of the Christian teaching from the earliest ages to the present, with Catholic and Protestant alike . . . and we do not yet know how to take life in a frankly, healthy spirit, with the result that we are always oscillating between unhealthy outbursts of over indulgence in purely sensual pleasures, and equally unhealthy displays of a prurient puritanism.

Now it is certainly far easier to trace the influence of Jesus and of historic Christianity in this direction than in that of sweetening and purifying life. That those who took the ascetic view were mistaken is at best an assumption: that they were sincere does not admit of question. It may also be noted that there is a strange dearth of teaching in the New Testament concerning the family. True it is not condemned, but it is in part deprecated, and in part ignored. One might go carefully through the New Testament without finding enough counsel therein on which to bring up a family. Among the Christian writers of the first few centuries the teaching that family life was more or less of a drag on spiritual development held a high place. A few—and a very few—do pay a little attention to this topic, but with all there is an absence of any adequate conception of the influence of family life in refining and elevating human nature. It will be noted how seldom children are mentioned in the Christian writings of

the first three centuries, and the less pleasing features of the succeeding centuries can be attributed to this omission. The Christian appeal was to the individual as such, and not always to the individual at his best. The clarifying conception of the individual as an expression of family and social life is quite absent.

And when we add to these grave faults of omission and commission the inculcation of indiscriminate almsgiving, the contempt of riches, and the blessings of poverty, the teaching of non-resistance, the behest to trust in God who will care for man as he cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, with the exhortation to the disciples to trust for support to the charity of those amid whom they preach, the absurdity of parading genuine Christian morality as an adequate social ethic becomes apparent. We are not dealing with a gospel of social regeneration, but with a teaching of asceticism perfectly familiar to students of Eastern religions.

Far from Christianity presenting us with an adequate social ethic, it is positively deficient in both a rational conception of the nature of morality and of the conditions of its development. The mere enunciation of superficially attractive moral precepts does not—to modern minds, at least—constitute a man a great moral teacher, and it is certain the world is not perishing for want of moral counsel of this description. Moral maxims and precepts have always been sufficiently plentiful, generally ignored, and largely useless. Those who by nature could appreciate them stood in small need of their guidance: those who did need their guidance were unable to appreciate them. Moreover, general precepts of the nature of those attributed to Jesus, and which Christian teachers have been always pleased to preach—and ignore—are necessarily vague in character, and correspondingly useless in practice. To be of use we require with such precepts some rule of interpretation that would allow of their application to the changing circumstances of a developing society. To love one's neighbour as one's self

may be a good enough rule, but its value will depend upon the circumstances determining its application. Christians who made the dungeon and the stake the reward of heresy were often enough convinced that they were acting in the best interests of their neighbours in seeking to enforce uniformity of belief upon all. So, too, with such a teaching as "The labourer is worthy of his hire." One cannot well conceive anyone disagreeing with this: and the agreement robs it of all practical value. What is needed is not the vague counsel that he who labours should receive adequate payment, but some equitable rule of determining what the social value of labour really is. The truth is that such precepts were never intended to apply to such social problems as confront modern society, and therefore they break down with any attempt to apply them.

"On the greater number of moral questions on which men require moral guidance Jesus has left no direction whatever."

The teaching of Jesus ignores the problems of industry, of civilisation, and of culture, and in so doing does positively nothing to develop the essential and all important element in life. The great fault of all Christian teaching and of Christian teachers has been the assumption that morality can develop without appropriate material and social conditions. Morality has been treated as though it existed in vacuo. It was in life, but it had no organic connection therewith, while social and material conditions have been looked on more as hindrances to a perfect morality than as the indispensable medium of its existence. People have been surfeited with moral teaching, while the conditions that would have made it of any value have been persistently ignored. Yet morality neither develops out of teaching nor does it altogether depend upon teaching for its development. The primary obligation to morality is not from precept, but from life. Precept only summarises a portion of what life has made manifest. The

purest flower of human conduct has its roots in the material conditions of life, and purely animal instincts of the human organism. Divorced from such conditions morality not only loses all meaning, it ceases to exist—it is as valueless as a plant from which one has cut the roots. In their action Christian teachers have doubtless followed the lead of the New Testament Jesus, and their failure is the result. Pagan philosophy gives us a much higher presentment of ethical truths, a much more satisfactory analysis of moral states. It is from the Pagan writings that we get a glimpse of the truth that it is a sanely ordered and developed intelligence that provides the surest guarantee of a satisfactory moral life. Purely Christian teaching knows it not; and the result is seen not only in the constant opposition of organised Christianity to scientific thought, but also in the continuous depreciation of character under its influence. Ignoring both the material and social conditions that make for a higher ethical life, it has prevented the little good that might have accrued from the doleful repetition of official moral platitudes.

The absurdity of parading the gospel Jesus, as a social reformer, is still more apparent when we note that the New Testament is silent on precisely those questions that concern the scientific sociologist. To commence with, the conception of the State as a definite organic structure is quite outside its purview. In the New Testament the only counsel concerning the State is of a kind to which modern thinking will attach little value. We are to render obedience to the "powers that be," for they are "ordained of God," and to resist them merits damnation. Historically, Christianity has carried out this teaching with a considerable degree of faithfulness. Every form of political and social tyranny has in turn received the unquestioning support of organised Christianity. Occasionally when the secular power has threatened the interests of the Church—often in the interests of the people—there have been signs of insubordination—but in the main its subservience has



been complete. So far as the early Christians are concerned political liberty and social reform were the things that concerned them least. It will be noted that as the Roman Empire became more Christian, so it became more submissive to the oriental form of government. The people lost their love of liberty, their taste for political independence. In the Christian spirit there was no turn for liberty, no rebellion, no assertion of right. The process was practically completed by Constantine, who found Christianity his most useful ally. And for obvious reasons.

"It strengthened in them (i.e., the people) the feeling of submissive reverence for government as such; it encouraged the disposition of the time to political passiveness. It was intensely conservative, and gave to power with one hand as much as it took away with the other. Constantine extended his patronage to the church and by so doing, he may be said to have purchased an indefeasible title by a charter. He gained a sanction for the Oriental theory of government. In all disputes between authority and liberty the traditions of Christianity are on the side of authority . . . The whole modern struggle for liberty has been conducted without help from the authoritative documents of Christianity. In the French Revolution men turned from the New Testament to Plutarch. . . . Plutarch furnished them with the teaching they required for their special purpose, but the New Testament met all their new-born political ardour with a silence broken only here and there by exhortations to submission.

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Nothing was further from the minds of primitive Christians than social reform; nothing more foreign to the whole of the New Testament than a political philosophy. That the State—in the sense of the entire social structure—could be, and in fact is, the great determinant in the life of man, is a view of things never once reached by the New Testament writers. The individual is addressed as an individual, not as a member of an organic whole. Yet in any really scientific view of the case general individual improvement is to be realised through social life, or not at all. For an ultimate analysis will show that man as an individual is an expression of social forces—forces that precede and survive his personal existence. Language, habit, frames of mind

and forms of belief are all a product of the social medium, and are only properly explainable by reference to social conditions. To consider man apart from this social medium is, to use an old metaphor, like considering the structure of a bird while ignoring the existence of an atmosphere. Divorce the individual from society, and from both the standpoints of psychology and natural history, he is an insoluble enigma.

Such a conception is, however, quite foreign to the New Testament, as is also that of a sense of obligation to the public at large. In this respect Christian ethics is much inferior to Pagan teaching. The question of the constitution of the ideal State, studies of existing social structures, with teachings concerning the duties of the individual to society, were common enough among Pagan writers.

The narrowing influence of Christian teaching at its best may be seen by a single illustration. In the Republic (Bk.v., c. 10) Plato had likened the State to the human organism, the parts of which suffer with any injury to the whole, the whole losing or gaining with injury or benefit to any of its parts. There is an obvious echo of this in one portion of St. Paul's teaching. The same illustration is used, but with an important difference. The Pagan applies it to the State as a whole; the Christian teacher carries it no further than a petty organism within the State. In the hands of Plato the principle was essentially inclusive and social. In the hands of Paul it is essentially exclusive and sectarian. The one is based upon a perception of the fact that the interdependence of human beings is a natural, an organic fact, transcending and embracing all smaller differences. The other is no more than an appreciation of the necessity of common action and mutual support among a select community united by the bonds of a common belief. Under such conditions the conception could only serve as a social bond in the improbable event of the whole of the members of a society being in voluntary agreement on questions that must always be of a speculative character.

And, as a mere matter of historical fact, Christianity has always served more as a cause of social division than of social union.

Christian teaching, on this head, is on a much lower plane than that current among the Pagans. Instead of teachings concerning the nature and function of the State, we have either an ignoring of the subject, or the doctrine that the State is to be accepted as a fact wherever it exists, and whatever its form, and that its commands are to be obeyed whenever they do not directly traverse Christian teachings and practices. The legitimate fruit of the Christian conception of social duty was seen in the advice of Luther given to the princes, that they might shoot, stab, poison, or put out of the way like mad dogs, those peasants who had risen against the hereditary feudalism of their time.

The case against Christian social morality is still further enforced when we note the New Testament teaching concerning the position of woman and the question of slavery. In both cases Christian teaching fails to reach the highest level of Pagan thought. Women are commanded to keep silence in the churches; they are not to be permitted to teach; the man is to be looked upon as the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the Church; and wives are ordered to obey their husbands as Sarah obeyed Abraham—a form of obedience that would get a husband lynched now-a-days, were it insisted on. In the early Christian literature women are denounced as incurably vile; opprobrious epithets are showered upon her; she is everywhere treated as an inferior creature. Certainly no literature the world has yet seen has taken a lower view of women than that assumed in the Christian writings of the first few centuries, nor have centuries of subsequent development quite destroyed, in the average Christian mind, the poor conception of woman engendered in the early centuries of this era.

So, again, with slavery. The only form in which Chris-

tianity encountered a labour problem in early times was in the form of the question of slavery. And with what result? In all the recorded utterances of the Gospel Jesus, there is not a single condemnation of slavery as an institution. In the Pagan world the question of the legitimacy of slavery was already beginning to excite interest; slaves themselves were exhibiting symptoms of unrest; but the Gospel Jesus appears oblivious to their existence. Further, we find St. Paul sending back a runaway slave to his master, and commanding slaves (wrongly translated "servants" in the English New Testament) to be obedient to their masters, in fear and trembling, whether they be good or bad, and to count them as being "worthy of all honour," whether the masters be believers or unbelievers; while to bear unmerited punishment in silence and patience is to be counted to their honour hereafter. The influence of this Christian teaching and spirit was seen in the absolute cessation of the Pagan legislation for the betterment of the lot of the slave, followed by a re-introduction, under Christian emperors, of some of the harsher features that had been removed. The modern black-slave trade, it must also be noted, was pre-eminently a Christian traffic—instituted by Christians, and at a time when the supremacy of Christianity was practically unquestioned. And it remained, backed up by Christians, who quoted the New Testament and "the pure Christianity of Apostolic times" as their authorities, until the writings of Thomas Paine, with the perception that free labour was economically more advantageous than forced labour, led to its abolition. And the glaring fact remains that no Christian country has ever abolished slavery while its continuance was economically profitable. Thus an examination of the one point on which both the teaching and influence of Christianity on the position of the poor could be decisively tested, results in an emphatic condemnation.

A defence of Christian morality is often attempted, not from the standpoint of direct teaching, but from that of its

sympathy with weakness and suffering, and the spirit of compassion it has evoked. Now no one, so far as I am aware, has any complaint to make against sympathy with suffering, or with the desire to help such as fall by the way in the struggle of life. Still it could, I think, be shown that even in this direction Christianity, by placing sympathy on a sectarian rather than a humanitarian basis, has given its development anything but a healthy turn. But the point of any criticism against Christianity is that, by its lack of desirable social teaching and intellectual discipline, it has tended to make sympathy with suffering maudlin and injurious instead of sane and helpful. Had Christianity merely taught kindness towards the unfortunate, criticism would have been impossible. But it has done more. It has glorified weakness and suffering, and held them up as necessary elements in an ideal character. It has taught people to be patient under wrong and oppression, where a preaching of discontent would have been far more helpful. It has preached patience—not the patience that results from the stern resolve to bear the inevitable with courage, but the patience that recognises in misery the work of an all-powerful providence whose decrees it is blasphemy to question. Patience of the former kind may have its uses; patience of the latter and Christian kind only makes the continued existence of wrong the more certain.

All that Christian teaching has ever done is, at most, to make the lot of the sufferer a little more tolerable. But, so far as our sympathies lead to this, without our knowledge causing us to essay the task of preventing the perpetuation of evil social conditions and the continued existence of an undesirable type, our sympathies tend to become our deadliest enemies instead of our best friends. The problem before us is a simple one, so far as its statement is concerned. Nature's method of securing a desirable type is by a process of sheer elimination. The growth of sympathy and knowledge places a check upon this process in human society. Both unite in keeping alive those who,

under other conditions, would have been killed off. I am not aware that anyone would wish it to be otherwise, only while this is the case all would be better pleased did an undesirable kind not exist. Still more pleased should we be at the destruction of those social conditions of which an undesirable type is, in part, an expression. But to perpetuate a poor kind of human nature is desirable from neither a biological nor a social point of view. The great question before society today is really this: Having suspended the operation of natural selection in a particular direction in relation to human society, what are we doing to bring about the birth of a better type, or to secure its survival, once it is brought into the world? And, from the standpoint of this enquiry, the question is: What has Christianity ever done, either in teaching or in practice, to give a satisfactory lead on the matter?

A candid enquiry would show that Christianity, by its foolish glorification of suffering and pain, by the very fact of the quality of its ideal character, has not only done nothing positive, but it has blinded people to the real gravity of the danger. From thousands of pulpits it has preached that pain develops character, that suffering sweetens and ennobles life. They do nothing of the kind. They deaden and degrade. The world is full of broken and blasted lives that would have been far different from what they are but for their experience of pain and misery. This teaching has been a useful one for the few whose power has been consolidated by its acceptance; it has been a disastrous teaching for the many. By its influence the public conscience has been deadened to the existence of the mass of removable misery in its midst. Christian sympathy may have made its existence bearable; a healthy intelligence would have made its continuance an impossibility.

In truth, the intellectual insight and foresight necessary to frame a satisfactory moral or social code is quite lacking, both in Christianity and in its titular founder. Taking the character of Jesus as it stands in the New Testament, its

intellectual calibre is far below that of Zoroaster, Confucius, or Buddha. In the case of either of these we encounter flashes of wisdom, deep insight into many of the problems of life. In the case of the Gospel Jesus we never leave the region of moral platitude. Instead of the thinker wrestling with the world's problems, we have the religious enthusiast exhorting the people to submit to the will of God. We find him insisting on the value of blind faith, while ignoring the need of right enquiry and the conditions of rational belief, and threatening vengeance against such as reject his message. Even in the case of the injunction against oath-taking, it is the lower, not the higher ground that is taken. The reason given is a religious one, where it should have been rejected as a slur upon a person's honesty, and an appeal to his fear of punishment instead of to his love of truth.

Surrounded by all forms of superstition, Jesus rejected none. All were accepted without question. Outside Judea, Pagan science had propounded correct theories as to the shape of the earth, the true nature of disease, the causes of many natural phenomena, while the conception of natural law was steadily gaining ground. Never for a moment does Jesus show himself superior to the ignorance of the Jewish peasantry amidst whom he moved. The belief in legions of angels and devils and in demoniacal possession is held with a gravity that would be laughable but for its sorrowful after-consequences. For it was his example that gave a fuller measure of authority to the witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries, and to the practice of exorcism as a cure for lunacy. The teachings upon this head are plain and unmistakable. No one doubts their meaning, and no one believes them. And yet the teacher who laid down this ignorant doctrine, who looked for legions of angels to carry out his bidding, and who walked with, talked with, and cast out devils, whose whole teaching was based upon a discredited supernaturalism, is held up before us as an ideal social reformer and perfect moral guide!

What do we really find when we carefully and honestly test Christian morality? We have a founder who has nothing to do with civilisation, with culture, with work, or industry. We have an ideal character, himself a celibate and encouraging celibacy in others, its greatest apostle recommending celibacy as the more desirable state, and celibacy upheld by the greatest of Christian Churches throughout the whole of its existence. We have the whole question of the State ignored, with a complete absence of any recognition of the fact that man is a member of a social organism, whose salvation is only to be gained through the salvation of the whole. We find slavery endorsed, and women deliberately relegated to an inferior position, with an absence of an adequate code for the rearing of a family. We have a number of moral maxims, largely useless because of their vague character, some harmful because of the extravagant form in which they are cast, and all without the intellectual perception of the conditions that make a sane morality possible. And finally, we have the whole of these teachings crystalised in organisations that have admittedly acted with disastrous influence on the world's welfare. People of all shades of political and social opinion, it is sometimes said, look to Jesus for guidance. They may, but their doing so is surely evidence that no clear rule of guidance is to be found in that quarter. For real help, man is thrown back upon himself, and although many—some for interested purposes, some for other reasons—continue to cloak the fruits of human experience with a religious covering, one day we may hope the non-essential will be discarded, and honour given where it is due.