

Misery and Christianity

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If religion means anything at all it has to be relevant to our situation. It has to be a source of hope for desperate people. I specify desperate people because those who are contented and happy rarely search for solutions until disaster forces them.

In my sixties, I try to come to some conclusions. There is not much time left and the need for solutions is more urgent. I have made a long search by attending Anglican, Methodist, Pentecostal, Quaker and other Christian churches and by reading their writers. All have made some impact but left me unsatisfied. It may be my fault that I am not satisfied, but, since my search has been genuine, I have taken some drastic measures. I have sold my house and home and come to London, with only my clothes, to work as Warden in a hostel for thirty-six homeless women. These are raw material. They come from every kind of society and collectively they have suffered everything. Very often I admire individuals; altogether, they are generally hell to live with. They do not read and their vocabulary is limited. Some are on drink, on drugs; on smoking, on bingo, on jumble-sales or on sleep. I reflect again that religion in England has been mainly the product of the middle classes expecting a high degree of articulation and academic study. Words come to mind—'eucharist', 'litany', 'transubstantiation', 'atonement'. Even worse, 'logical positivism', 'language-games', 'semantics', 'linguistics'. Can these help my guinea pigs? Not much.

So many of our theologians and philosophers seem to live in ivory towers. Do they starve, live on social security, feel they are socially worthless, sink into apathy, drown their pain in gin or whisky? To these troubles add physical illness and emotional instability. I repeat, religion must be relevant to the situation and provide a source of hope for desperate people.

I must make another criticism of academic writers on religion. They constantly quote the sayings of Bidy and Diddy. This encourages a growth industry of its own—all successful students also have read Bidy and Diddy. Then one must read the critics of B and D and so on. The first speaker, who wrote no books, is lost sight of. Even more ignored is the abundant witness to the fact that Christ was a man of action. He spent his time in field-work, close to the desperate people. He spoke—if we can agree that he

said anything—from the experience of being a grass-root himself. In Mark, Jesus is emphasised as healing: healing individuals, healing groups and even crowds of people. He heals physical, mental, emotional and spiritual illness and commands his twelve ordinary friends to exercise this faculty also—it was a sign that the Kingdom was at hand. These things the Christian churches have so often played down. “I’m glad no-one gets healed in our church”, said the Vicar’s wife to me. Of course a widespread Christian church healing wretched people at no cost to themselves would attract the hostility of all kinds of vested interests. But it could be a great demonstration of the truth of the Gospel. I do know of a few Christian practitioners of the gift of healing, even their own churches being very chary of acknowledging them.

Consider the hefty commonsense that Christ used when being badgered to lay down hard lines, rules, definitions, proofs and supernatural guarantees. “If seven brothers all married one wife?”—the question was irrelevant. What about rules for the Sabbath? It was made for men, not to bind them. David in a crisis ate the shewbread. Eating with dirty hands? Not the point. The basis of Jesus’s gospel was disinterested love. You cannot prove its truth by backing it up with supernatural signs which were not forthcoming on demand. The ring of truth from experience persuades me that the gospels tell a genuine story. It is quite different from myth or legend and turns upside down the preconceived notions of divinity. When Christ was down “they all forsook him and fled”—they would. The cruelty of the Roman soldiers, the mob demonstrations, the lust for power of the Sadducees, the academic superiority of the Pharisees, the obstinate demand for ‘rules’ rather than ‘love’ as a way of life, the blindness of prejudice, the complete inability to acknowledge any experience as valid except one’s own; all these are as normal today as they were then.

Though Christ expressed faith in God, he also praised faith in himself and faith in the powerful action of faith itself. Faith in faith? Certainly. Every day people realise this is true: every football manager tries to put it into practice, every mountain climber climbs the mountain in his heart. Just raw belief is a great healer—in fact Christ says that we must believe in the ability of the person to be well, to get well, to recover wellness, to practise the whole life. We can see this doctrine put into reverse by the great number of those who only have faith in their own illness and prove their point by remaining ill. Christ does not insist that this is a new discovery—I do not think he makes new conditions but insists on those conditions which he notices as real. Among those conditions he says that love is the essence of the solution to the human problem. Of course this also applies to the sufferer. He must “stretch forth his withered arm”. Those who say they cannot love often confuse love with passion or sentiment. You can set your

mind to the business of loving by acting in positive charity towards someone else. In other words, you can practise. But it is hard work and does not bring rewards of a glamorous nature.

Luke spends some time in establishing his claim to be a genuine historian. He confirms the healing nature of Christ's mission. He quotes more teaching and also states that exercise of love should expect nothing in return. We feel this is bleak. It is noteworthy that when John's messengers asked him who he was, Christ's demonstration of the Kingdom was that "the blind see, the lame walk". This is important. The Christians should be able to point to the misery relieved, the crowds of distressed and hopeless people who naturally come to Christian communities to be restored. But they cannot. We try nowadays to establish our position by reference to books; but this does not work. (An interesting point—I went to Holborn Library to get a copy of the Bible. I found rows of books about the Bible, but no Bible).

There are, of course, an unlimited number of structures and doctrines added to Christian practice which have been produced by later churches. I agree entirely that organisation was inevitable. But organisations are never infallible. And the expectations and life—style of different cultures need not be rigidly bound to the past. If we could illustrate the Kingdom of God in so simple a way—"the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, to the poor the gospel is preached"—should we not be on safer ground? Who said we had to be burdened with paid officials, with masses of property? Who dictates the service? Why should we quarrel over peripheral subjects like celibacy and so on? We were only asked to love each other so much that the healing of wretchedness would ensue. There was no limit put to that.

Matthew refers to the great multitudes of people who came to be healed. Quite explicitly we are commanded to practise love—to love our enemies indeed. There is an element of stern teaching in Matthew; it does not accord with the tolerance of today. We must take the most extreme measures to see that we are not a cause of offence to little ones—whether they be young or simple or naive. The worth of unimportant people is stressed. The whole notion of importance is turned upside down. Personal ambition is discouraged. How does that strike us today? But it does seem that strong verbal protest is in order. Sitting on the fence is not the way of Matthew's Christ.

There is the matter of his ability to walk on water. Let this stand for all the other supernatural actions described. To many Christians these are a scandal. All those who belong to the school of thought which says "What I can't do, you can't do" have a hard time explaining away the reported abilities of Christ. But fortunately in a lifetime so many changes of belief occur, and in centuries these changes can be multiplied. It would thus seem ill-advised

for anyone to be dogmatic about the powers both understood and dormant in the human race. I prefer to leave all doors open, but I confess to an inclination to believe that Christ used a much wider range of powers than the average man.

It seems odd to me that the truth or untruth of the gospels is not more directly tested by direct experiment among self-styled Christians. I must insist that the literacy test was not applied by Christ. Living here with my raw material I find out that love is not sentimental. I evict 'helpless old ladies' nearly every week. I find they are confidence tricksters, or very dirty, or cruel bullies, too violent for us to stand it any longer. I am the judge, jury and executioner. What right have I to perform like this? It is my job. I protect the household from the minority who spoil everything. Are not the minority sick? Yes, of course, But I am the only resident staff and cannot cope with them. So (with the help of the police) I perform summary justice. And it is forced on me that communities live by rules and I am 'hard-hearted'. I do not live here for physical comfort. There is none. Nor do I stay for my small salary. So love must sometimes protect society from unlove and it forces me to be cruelly unkind. Is this in the gospels? Well, we should be missing the point if we did not see that the kind of life expected calls for enormous discipline—self-discipline. It is not popular. But how can anyone be a patient, courteous, generous and compassionate person without much practice? If I am to be honest (and I handle all the money, several hundreds of pounds a week), clean, cheerful, provident, practical and understanding, then I have to be disciplined. The results of being dishonest, dirty, improvident, lying, drunken and quarrelsome do eventually become intolerable. It seems as though those women who have no discipline at all bring on themselves the eviction which I practise. There will be many to protest that we should keep on harping on the effects of deprivation and so forth. These attitudes are often held by those who have not tried to live as Warden for thirty-six homeless women. I feel that society has left me on my own to promote the rules of civilised behaviour, and in this capacity I push out the few to care for the most, calling in the police to help. I say this again to emphasise that my ultimate weapon is force. And I dislike force.

I realise that Christ would have healed some of these. I doubt whether he would have 'made' them good—but he could have healed many of the disorders which are the root cause of their failures. This is where the Christian church has failed. It was commanded to heal, and it does not. One Quaker woman who took the command seriously spent four hours a day in silent concentration, at six a.m. noon, six p.m. and midnight. Then she became a healer, wonderfully successful. How many will make such an effort? If the churches healed, would they not be besieged by the

sick, the unbalanced, the old and poor? Yes, read Mark.

Almost all great teachers, statesmen and prophets, suffer from the fact that their followers are not able to live up to the original message. I think the Christian community took a fatal step in the wrong direction when it became the 'Established Church', of the Roman Empire. This meant that it immediately compromised its original position. The whole business of patronage, politics, property, and pro-government thinking became set up, and has bedevilled us ever since. I have no ambition to set up yet another new sect. But I would say to those who are confused and dismayed by the babel of voices that one can go back to the Gospels and find in them practical guides to living. Put into actual practice what you can, without expecting any rewards, except the conviction that the continuous reducing of misery is the best we can do, and Christ did it.

Now that Christianity is under constant attack, we have not many champions. Is it because we waste our energies on defining the pitch, altering the rules, qualifying the players, and never getting on with the game?

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