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The Gospel and Modern Western Culture

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In this 20th century Christianity is spreading more rapidly than in any previous century, but the heartland of the faith is no longer in Europe. It is in Africa and the Far East that the Church is experiencing very rapid growth, while in Europe it is shrinking or, at best, defensive. If one is looking at the global situation of the Christian world mission, there is no doubt that the most difficult mission field is right here in the old Christendom. What Walter Lipman called 'the acids of modernity' seem to have power to disintegrate and dissolve traditional Christian belief. And since modernization is the ambition of those very societies which are now experiencing rapid Christian expansion, we must expect the same acids to do the same work there in the coming generations.

Plainly it would be absurd to explain the situation by saying that the Christians of Asia and Africa are better than Europeans. We have to ask why the culture of 'modernity' is so resistant to the Gospel. Missiologists, using the tools of cultural anthropology have studied the cultures of societies from China to Peru; they have not found it easy to make the same kind of study of 'modern' culture. The reason is obvious. There is a Chinese proverb to the effect that, if you want a definition of water, you do not ask a fish. The tools of cultural anthropology are part of the total culture which has to be examined. Our culture functions as the lenses through which we see the world. While we are surveying the world, we do not see the lenses in our own eyes. Normally it is only through the experience of deep immersion in another culture that one gains the perspective from which to look with fresh eyes at one's own. That is why, I believe, the foreign missionary movement can make a vital contribution now to the task of mission in the modern western world. In my experience, most of those who have been awakened to the need for a fresh encounter of the Gospel with western culture are men and women with long experience of missionary service in another culture.

Dr Paul Hiebert, a cultural anthropologist who has also had long missionary experience in India, has said that the most distinctive element in modern western culture, differentiating it from all other contemporary cultures, is the bifurcation of life into the private and the public, a public

world of 'facts' which we know and a private world of 'beliefs and values' which are a matter of the personal choice of each individual. The former is the world which controls public education and the professions; the latter operates in the private sector. Of course we all recognize that within all western societies there are many subcultures, and because these are different from each other, we are conscious of them as distinct cultures. We are less aware of that which is common to them all, common to everyone who has been through the accepted system of public education.

One way to gain perspective on our own culture is to look at it from the angle of history. European culture was not always so. There was a time when the Gospel was regarded as part of public truth, having a central place in the school curriculum and in the university. There are relics of this still, but they are only relics. How did it come about that Christianity ceased to be part of public truth and became a matter of private opinion?

To answer this question it may be helpful to distinguish between two elements in the dichotomy: there is the dichotomy between knowing and believing, and there is the dichotomy between fact and value. Let us look at these two dichotomies in that order.

Knowing and Believing

The English philosopher John Locke defined belief as 'a persuasion which falls short of knowledge'. At least in the English-speaking world that is still the operative definition. I may say 'I believe' in a matter where I am not prepared to say 'I know'. Belief, then, is what we have to make do with when knowledge is not available.

Twelve centuries earlier St Augustine gave a different account of the relation between knowing and believing. 'I believe in order to know' (Credo ut intelligam). Belief is the way to knowledge. If we reflect on our experience, we shall surely see that Augustine is right. All our learning has to begin with believing. We have to believe the evidence of our senses. We learn to speak by believing the words of our parents. We begin the study of any matter by believing the authorized teachers and text-books. Later, it is true, we have to question some of the things we first took on trust, but we can only do so on the basis of other things which we have come to know by the same path. We do not come to know anything except by believing something.

The 'something' which Augustine believed in order to know was the story told in the Bible and focused in those events which are the substance of the Gospel. He had been intellectually shaped by the classical tradition of antiquity, but that tradition was dying. It could not find within itself the answers to the problems it raised. Augustine found in the Christian tradition that given 'something' which, accepted in faith, opened the way to a fuller understanding of the human reality and of God, the Author of all that is. He became apprentice to a new tradition.

It is this way of relating faith to knowledge which operated in Europe during the thousand years in which Europe became something more than the western edge of Asia, the centuries in which the Bible provided the lenses through which the barbarian tribes of Europe learned to view the world and the human situation. The classical tradition, in which Augustine had first been shaped, still exercised its influence in that Latin became the lingua franca of western Europe, but the Bible was just that, the Book the one book which was available to everyone through the liturgy and preaching of the Church, its art and its festivals.

Eight hundred years after Augustine a dramatic change occurred. In so far as Augustine's thought as a Christian was shaped by classical thought, the main influence was that of Plato. The rationalism of Aristotle was only a muted voice. But, during these centuries, it had found a new home in the house of Islam. The Christians of the Church of the East had translated Aristotle into Syriac, and, when their civilization was overwhelmed by the tide of Muslim conquest, they taught Aristotle to their Arab masters and translated him into Arabic. Aristotelian rationalism became an integral part of Islamic theology. During the period when Muslims, Jews and Christians were in active contact in the Iberian peninsula, Aristotle was translated into Hebrew and Latin. The translation of the great Muslim commentaries on Aristotle into Latin in the 11th and 12th centuries created an immense impact on western Christendom. Here was a radically different approach to knowledge from the one hitherto dominant. How could this new Aristotelian

rationalism be related to the biblical tradition. For a time the teaching of Aristotle was banned by the Church, but this could not be the final solution. The great work of Thomas Aquinas, which was to shape European thought for centuries, sought a synthesis between the two, so that biblical faith and the 'new science' could live together.

But the co-habitation was achieved at a cost. It meant putting asunder what Augustine had held together. Aquinas distinguished two pathways to knowledge. There were things which could be established by the work of reason alone; these included the existence of God and of the soul. There were other things which could only be known by divine revelation accepted in faith, such as the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Trinity. That dichotomy between knowledge acquired by the use of reason, and knowledge given by divine revelation and accepted by faith, has remained with us ever since. It has left us with two problems. The first is that the God whose existence is proved by reason is not recognizable as the God who encounters us in the Bible. Which, then, is the true God? Is the 'God of the Philosophers' the true God, and the God of the Bible an anthropomorphic distortion resulting from the immaturity of the race? Or, contrariwise, is the God of the Bible the true living God, and the God of the philosophers a product of the human mind, an image constructed by the mind, perhaps a 'Brockenspectre' as claimed by Feuerbach? This question still divides the Church.

The second difficulty is even more serious. If we required the reasoning of the philosopher to prove the existence of God, if – in other words – God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ is not in itself enough to provide us with assurance, then everything depends on the strength of the philosophical arguments. They must be absolutely certain. But they are not. They are fragile and have often been demolished – at least to the satisfaction of philosophers. The way is open for scepticism.

In the 16th and 17th centuries scepticism was widespread in Europe. 'Can we know anything at all?' was the question debated among the intellectuals. This mood was heightened by the new perspectives opened up by the work of such men as Galileo, Copernicus and Kepler. What had always seemed unassailable certainties were now questioned. It was in this intellectual milieu that a young French philosopher, Renee Descartes, received from a cardinal of the Church the commission to produce an absolutely certain proof of the existence of God. We are familiar with the method he employed and the result he bequeathed. The method was to begin with something indubitable (his own existence as a thinking mind), to build on this deductions having the clarity and indubitability of mathematics, and so to build a structure of indubitable knowledge. Opinions, however strongly held, would not qualify as knowledge unless their truth could be demonstrated by these methods.

Descartes' method has had the effect of re-establishing in the thought of Europe dualisms which had plagued classical thought and which the biblical perspective had replaced. There are pairs of words which we use so constantly that we can hardly think without them – 'spiritual and material', 'objective and subjective', 'theory and practice'. These words, and the dualism they represent, are absent from the Bible. They have become so integral to our ways of thinking that we find it very hard to recognize that they are not a necessary element in human understanding. There is no space to develop the implications of this here. Even more fundamental have been the consequences of Descartes' 'critical method'. This has been, for three centuries, the jewel in the crown of western intellectual culture. At a popular level it has bequeathed to us the absurd fashion of thinking which supposes that doubt is a more respectable activity than faith. Doubt is popularly regarded as 'honest' while faith is regarded as 'blind'. This is, of course, absurd. Both faith and doubt have necessary roles in the whole enterprise of knowing, but faith is primary and doubt is secondary for the simple reason that we can only (if we are rational) doubt a proposition on the basis of other propositions which we believe to be true. At the level of academic debate the legacy of Descartes is (ironically) a deep fog of scepticism which hangs over western thought. Perhaps it is enough to point to Kant's assertion that the reality of things is forever beyond our knowledge and that we can only know the appearances, the phenomena. This has become so much an unquestionable axiom of popular thinking that it is almost impossible to draw attention to its self-

contradictory character since it already implies that we know what ultimate reality is. How otherwise could we know that it is unknowable?

The inevitable end-product of the Cartesian programme has been nihilism. It was, I suppose, Nietzsche who first articulated this in a way which could not be evaded. Truth is unattainable and claims to know the truth are in fact assertions of the will, the will to dominate. Nietzsche's contemporary disciples, the deconstructionists and the post-modernists, have turned their back on the great dream of the Age of Reason. There are no 'eternal truths of reason' as Lessing supposed. There are only 'regimes of truth' as Michael Foucault tells us, regimes which successively destroy their predecessors but which are themselves answerable to no ultimate and over-arching truth. The end-product of Descartes' project of total certainty is total scepticism. It naturally follows that the Church's proclamation of the Gospel is not seen as an invitation to believe what is true, but as the attempt of a failing social institution to re-assert its former power.

Fact and Value

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has written that 'fact' in modern English is 'a folk concept with an aristocratic ancestor'. The aristocrat in question was Francis Bacon, often regarded as the 'morning star' of modern science. Bacon advised his contemporaries to 'abjure speculation and collect facts'. By 'speculation' he referred to the so-called 'universals' of traditional philosophy, such things as 'essence', 'existence' and 'substance'. By 'facts' (which is originally the Latin *factum*, something which has been done) he referred to things which, unlike these universals, can be seen, handled and measured. For our present purpose the important fact is that there was one of the 'universals' which he retained. He eliminated the concept of purpose, but he retained the concept of cause. Now 'cause' is obviously not something which can be seen and handled. It is possible even to deny its existence, as a later philosopher was to do. But Bacon accepted it. Things were to be understood not by discovering their purpose but by understanding their causes. To trace out the chains of cause-and-effect which relate different things and events to each other, was to understand them. This is what 'explanation' was to be. And this has been the method of science as we know it in the modern world. No one can deny its enormous consequences. Modern science has increased our understanding of 'how things work' beyond all previous imagination. And no one doubts that 'science works'. Doubts remain about whether it 'explains'.

The decision on method, namely to seek for causes and not for purposes, has two consequences. The first is the separation of 'fact' from 'value'. There is no logical link between 'is' and 'is good'. We can only say that a thing is good if we can answer the question 'good for what?'. To use one of MacIntyre's nice examples, we normally agree that if a watch has not lost ten seconds in ten years it is a good watch: a value-claim based on a factual statement. But, as MacIntyre says, we only make this logical move because the idea of purpose is already part of our idea of 'watch'. It is a machine for keeping time, not for decorating the room or for throwing at the cat. If we do not know the purpose for which these pieces of metal are put together in this way, we may unravel all the cause-effect links which make it work, but we will not be able to say whether it is good or bad. Such value judgements will be merely matters of personal preferences. Such value judgements will have no basis in facts.

The second result of Bacon's method is nicely encapsulated in his own oftquoted works: 'Knowledge is power'. If we know what makes things happen, and if there are no purposes already embodied in things, if – in other words – no purpose is at work in the created world except our human purposes, then we can interfere with the workings of nature to make them carry out our purposes. No doubt the original meaning of Bacon's phrase is that knowledge confers power. It is an easy step from this that brings us to the same conclusion that Nietzsche reached, namely that the only reality is power. Values are not realities in the 'factual' world; they are expressions of the will of the person who desires a certain state of affairs. They are not part of an extra-human reality; they are an expression of the will. And, plainly, if this is the way things are seen, then the preaching of the Gospel is not an exposition of facts, not an account of the reality with which all

human beings must finally take account. It is an expression of the will of the Christian Church to recover something of its lost power.

How do we communicate the Gospel in this cultural context?

Communicating the Gospel to Modernity

The first thing to be said is a negative. We must not try to commend the Gospel by trying to show that it can be accommodated within the 'modern scientific world-view'. We must reject the attempt to demonstrate the 'reasonableness of Christianity' by adjusting the truth-claims of the Gospel to the contemporary world-view. On the contrary we have to challenge that world view at the most radical level, or – perhaps more truly – we have to show that the splendid vision of the Enlightenment has collapsed, not because it was false, because the intellectuals of the 'Age of Reason' did not realise that their 'self-evident truths' were not self-evident at all but only seemed self-evident to a society which had been shaped for more than a thousand years by the biblical tradition. When that tradition has almost died out of western Europe, the great truths of the Age of Reason disappear into the fog of nihilism. From the story which I have tried to sketch I draw three conclusions about the way of approach to our evangelistic task in the modern world. They concern the relations of faith and reason, the roles of cause and purpose, the alternative models of 'natural law' and narrative.

1. Faith and Reason

Modern historians and philosophers of science have prepared the way for us by showing how the work of science rests and has always rested upon faith commitments which are not open to a priori verification. Modern science has developed in this part of the world precisely because the culture of Christendom was impregnated from the start by convictions about the rational coherence of the cosmos as a created, therefore contingent and not necessary rationality. The historian Christopher Kaiser has shown how the theologians of the late 4th century, in critical dialogue with contemporary Greek science, developed on the basis of their biblical faith principles which have supported and directed the work of European science to the present day. And scholars like Michael Polanyi, working on the epistemology of science, have shown how remote from reality is the popular image of science as an enterprise which makes redundant the deeper human faculties of faith, intuition and imagination. All scientific work, and indeed all rational thought of any kind, has to accept something as given, as data, as starting point. Reasoning cannot begin unless there is something already there, given and accepted as starting point. The American philosopher Wolfenstorf has neatly reversed Kant's title in his book entitled 'Reason within the limits of Religion' in which he makes the point that all reasoning works within the parameters of the assumptions which control the thinking of a society, and in the great majority of societies throughout history these assumptions have normally been embodied in what we call 'religion'. Another American writer, Roy Clouser, in 'The Myth of Religious Neutrality' has illustrated the point by detailed study of theories in the areas of mathematics, physics and psychology, showing how all such theories depend upon a faith commitment to something which is ultimate, that is to say something on which everything else depends and which is itself dependent on nothing beyond itself - the kind of reality for which religion uses the word 'God'.

The split in our culture between what is supposed to be certain knowledge based on reason, and what is supposed to be uncertain opinion based on faith is false. Human knowledge, seen not just as the knowing of individual persons but as the corporate effort and achievement of us all, is an organic whole. There is no such discontinuity between 'science' and other kinds of knowing as our culture supposes. But this split also runs through the Christian community in the division between those who label each other as 'liberals' and 'fundamentalists'. Both suppose that there is available a kind of certainty which admits of no possibility of doubt. The former draw the conclusion that Christian faith cannot be a matter of public truth because it is not indubitable knowledge. The latter seek to maintain the truth of the Gospel by denying the possibility of doubt

and, in support of this, develop a hard rationalist theology which is remote from grace. Both are victims of the assumptions of our culture.

2. Cause and Purpose

All human beings know that they are capable of entertaining purposes which look beyond the empirical realities of the present to possibilities in the future. These possibilities cannot be directly observed. Until the purpose is realised they remain hidden in the mind of the one whose purpose they are. By examining the observable phenomena of the natural world it is possible to discover the causes which operate in things. Purpose cannot be discovered by this kind of observation. To discover the purpose of any action one has two alternative possibilities. One can wait till the action is complete and then observe the result. Even this may not be completely satisfactory since the results of even the best thought-out purposes do not always embody those purposes. The other possibility is that the person whose purpose it is might reveal it by speech. The enquirer would have to decide whether to believe the agent or not. There can be no indubitable certainty. The first alternative, namely that the observer should wait until the project is completed, is not available to us if we are enquiring about the purpose (if any) for which the whole cosmos and human life exist. We have to act before that moment arrives. If the whole drama of cosmic and human existence has any purpose, it could only be made known to us by revelation from the one whose purpose it is, and this revelation could only be accepted in faith.

Modernity retained a belief in purpose because the deeply ingrained biblical tradition seemed to validate a belief in some kind of progress towards a desirable end, but this end was conceived not in the supra-historical perspective of the Bible but in terms of an intra-historical goal. That belief has collapsed. 'Modern' people do not now believe in progress as their grandfathers did. The post-moderns deny that there is any abiding purpose in things and the inevitable result is nihilism. The Church is entrusted with a revelation of the divine purpose, and it must be quite bold and explicit in affirming it as public truth, a truth without which human society can only dissolve into anarchy.

3. Narrative versus natural law

One way of describing the decisive shift which took place in the 18th century Enlightenment is to say that it was a shift in the location of reliable truth. Christian Europe had located reliable truth in a story, the story which the Bible tells and which is encapsulated in the ecumenical creeds. 'Modernity' locates reliable truth in timeless laws of nature, ideally stateable in mathematical formulae. A 'scientific' (so reliable) form of knowledge is understood to be expressed in timeless laws which explain how things work, what cause-effect relations are in operation, laws which enable us to predict the results which will follow from specific actions. The model of reality is mechanical, or – sometimes – organic, but it is not personal. Personal reality is revealed in the story of a life. While life lasts there are always unpredictable possibilities. Some characters are unpredictable because they lack a steady purpose. But great men and women whose lives have been dedicated to a noble purpose, are always capable of surprising us by acts whose meaning only becomes clear to us afterwards.

The Bible is the narrative which reveals the character of God. We learn who he is, and what are his purposes, by living in the story so that it functions as the lenses through which we understand the world. This is, of course, a description of the life of faith which is always open to surprises and is yet sustained by faith in the unshakeable integrity of the divine purpose. The business of the Church is to embody and to tell this story.

Post-modernity gives us a new and promising context in which to do so. It is no longer useful to try to 'fit' the Gospel to the requirements of 'modern' thought. Europe has lost faith in the 'eternal truths' of the Age of Reason. One of the most quoted phrases of the Enlightenment was the complaint of Lessing about the 'great ugly ditch' between contingent happenings of history and eternal truths of reason. The former (which include the events recorded in the Bible) can never demonstrate the eternal truths. But the post-moderns have turned Lessing upside down. The

so-called 'eternal truths of reason' are simply the accidental products of particular histories. They will pass and be replaced by other 'regimes of truth'.

The Church exists to embody and to tell the story which is the true story, the story which truly renders the character of God. Its truth cannot be demonstrated by the method of Descartes. It is not 'indubitable certainty'. But it is not merely one of the choices on offer in the intellectual supermarket. The story which the Church tells embodies the invitation of the Author of the story to all people to become part of the story. It is not just a matter of communicating truth; it is a matter of bringing a gracious invitation. When I am challenged with the question: 'How do you know that yours is the true story?', I must on no account repeat the fatal mistake of seeking the help of philosophy to buttress the credentials of divine revelation, as though something was available more reliable than what God has done in Jesus Christ. I can only say: This is what God has done, and I have been commissioned to bring you this invitation. Beyond that I cannot go. But less than that I cannot do, for if it is really true that God has done what the Gospel tells us that he has done, then how can I be silent about it, or allow it to be considered merely one of a variety of possible opinions. It must, it necessarily must become the starting point and the controlling reality of all thought, all action and all hope.

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