Christ the Absolute

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Christ is absolute, but Christianity, considered as a concrete, historical phenomenon, standing on the same footing as the rest in its character as one of the major religions, is not absolute. By absolute is meant unsurpassable, unimpeachable, valid, something which is fully authoritative and which is a standard of judgment. The proofs for the existence of God are an attempt to get at such an absolute beyond which nothing more can be said. All that the proofs have attempted to show is that the absolute gets its absoluteness from some more ultimate point of reference by virtue of which it is proved, so that the whole absoluteness of the absolute falls to the ground. And what might this superior point of reference be? It is after all the rational judgment of man, that is with a capital R; and as that pertains to man in his relative condition it cannot be absolute; the more so, since in the rational judgment of different men the voice of Reason, not infrequently, says different and contradictory things.

Hendrik Kraemer makes the following comments:[1] 'Christianity is, therefore, not absolute. It is not even in all respects the best religion if by that we mean the religion which has found, comparatively speaking, the best and noblest way of expressing religious truth and experience. During those parts of my life spent amidst other religions it has struck me many a time that certain religious attitudes and emotions are more finely expressed in those religions than in Christianity. That is plain for any fair-minded man to see, and one has a duty to say so and to give honour where honour is due. Here are a few instances of the case in point.

'If one moves in the Muslim world and sees there, for example, with what tremendous conviction the Muslim gives expression to the idea of Allah's sovereign majesty and reality in the "*Allahu Akbar*", one can look in vain for any parallel in Christianity, even in the most splendid liturgies (the core of which is found in Isaiah 6), which goes further and deeper than the absolute Omnipotence and sublime excellence of Allah. If one travels through India, one can meet with groups of pilgrims possessed by so deep and passionate a yearning after religious

[1] Hendrik Kraemer, *Why Christianity of All Religions?* (Lucknow Publishing House, Lucknow, 1966), pp. 115-116.

truth that one is reduced to silence by it and has to admit that one has never come across anything like it in "Christian" countries. As a Christian one feels oneself in contact here with a craving for God awakened by the Holy Spirit.'

Christianity as a religion which has unfolded in an historical setting is just like other religions in being a body of human ideas and institutions which is 'passing away', as all things human do, and so cannot possibly be absolute. The transient, non-absolute character of everything, including civilizations and religions, does not mean that nothing of eternal value can happen within them. In the light of our criterion, Jesus, the light of the world, a distinction does really have to be drawn between Christianity, as one among the religions, and the other religions. Christianity, as one of the religions, is to be distinguished from the other religions for this cardinal reason: that although it enjoys its full share of human frailty, Christianity does arise out of the Revelation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit.

Freytag draws a distinction between Christianity and the Gospel:[2] 'The relationship between the religions is by no means only a question of two quantities, Christianity and alien religions, but of a triple relationship: Christianity—the Gospel—alien religions . . . Christianity and the Gospel are not the same thing. They are in a polar relationship to one another. Christianity is a human answer to the gospel, to God's Word in Jesus Christ. As a human earthly answer Christianity is always subject to the rubric: "Not that I have already obtained" (Phil. 3:12) . . . It (Christianity) is the community of sinners standing in need of God's mercy . . . Christianity is both one religion among many and a unique phenomenon. It is a religion among many religions in so far as it is Christian piety, a human formation, an earthly community, in so far as it comes under God's judgment. And it is a unique phenomenon in so far as, and as soon as it is a witness for the Word, the Gospel, God's Revelation in Christ, for the one Revelation over against all religions; a "witness for"—that is to say, that Revelation is not at Christianity's disposal. Christianity itself has revelation only in faith, i.e. as a community of pardoned sinners.'

'It is very significant that the N.T. speaks of the "old man" what the Christian knows in himself as a fact and as a possibility in exactly the same terms as it speaks of the heathen. Apart from Christ, the Christian too is in the same position. Hence, "Try your own selves, whether ye be in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5). That is why the Christian community is urged, in the same words as the heathen, to repent and turn to Christ.'

The Christian-in-religion is also a heathen without Christ-in-Revelation. The defect with the Christian is that he forgets

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[2] Walter Freytag, *The Gospel and the Religions* (S.C.M. Press, London, 1957), p. 28.

the beam in his Christian eye. He is drowned by the dead-weight of the shallow, surface-religion, which divorces his own and his community's religious paraphernalia from his own and his community's response to the Word on the Cross. He tends to lament and even to curse, that he is on a cross on earth, and does not look up to stand aghast to find God Himself on the Cross. His religion is different from his Faith. Not so with Jesus. Jesus was His own religion. The modern Christian also must, in the mind of Christ, live his religion in response to God's address from Calvary.

A. N. Rowland writing in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* makes very illuminating remarks. The Latin word *religio* did not come into Christian usage until the fourth century, i.e. long after the gospels and epistles had been written. Lactantius writes: 'Religion is the link which unites man to God.' In the present-day Christian religion, this link has snapped. Religion only links man to fellowman for formal necessities as getting a name for a child, getting a marriage recognized, ensuring that a dead member has been treated with decency with a decent burial, and getting respectable social recognition to further one's power and position, and feather one's nest against rainy days. When the word religion came into Christian community life, the implications of the word were altogether external and, in accordance with Roman genius, almost administrative. The Greeks were unable to supply a word which would correspond with the Christian Faith and its fruit of the Spirit. The link was left out. The Greek *threskeia* translated religion in Acts 26:5 and James 1:26 f. was also spiritually threadbare and suggested nothing more than the ceremonial side of public worship. In India too today, it is even more tragically so. But religion is the soul's response to the spiritual revelation by which it is illumined, kindled and moved. With some of us, the revelation does not pass beyond the mind, with others it calls for little more than an indulgence of feeling, with others again it brings out only a discipline of obedience. But in true religion all three elements are present: 'It includes the whole energy of man as reasonable spirit.' The vitality of true religion and its dynamiting power are Revelation *PLUS* Response.

While we should not minimize that side of religion which is 'not ourselves' let us not forget that the responding individual is on this side of life the supreme religious fact as he is the one person, whose capacity of vision is the channel of authority. Yet, if truth is ultimately one, it must proceed by way of revelation from some objective source, as Oman says in *Vision and Authority*. Faith is not a monologue; it is a dialogue. Revelation finds its way into the soul both mediately and immediately. Jesus too used both media. Jesus is both the norm of religion, and the focus of Revelation, but He too used the O.T., the synagogue and the home as a mediate access

to God, and also used prayer and silent meditation, and total surrender and dedication and submission to His Father's Will as an immediate access to God. The average Christian needs to remember this and respond to his God's Revelation. Response to Revelation runs along three lines: (i) Dependence: 'Thou hast made us for Thyself, and I have no rest unless I rest myself in Thee.' (ii) Sacrificial contrition of heart and acceptance of Grace is made necessary by the fact of man's sin and separation from God. All sacrifices are vain, and superfluous unless they are the sacrifices of empty hands and a broken and a full heart. Christ is our sacrifice. (iii) Obligation: This is a constraining influence. He makes absolute claims. Jesus knew our nature, and our modern Christian nature too, too well to ask for a partial surrender and an obedience to formal, external, outward, surface, white-sepulchral hypocrisies. The Kantian '*I ought*' becomes the Christian '*I must*' in the uncompelled compulsion of surrender to 'unmerited Grace' and 'indiscriminate Love'. And as prayer is the expression of the sense of dependence, and sacrifice of the consciousness of separation, so the sacrament is the symbol of the sense of obligation.

Jesus is His own religion. He harmonizes for us the three lines of its working referred to above. He unifies its various forms. Three of these forms are (i) ritual (priests), (ii) speculation (theology and philosophy) and (iii) legal moralism (discipline, organization and administration). But Jesus did not incorporate His religion in a hierarchic order (as the Buddhists), or in philosophical oracles (as with Hindus), or in Codes and customs (as with Islam or Confucius or Manu). Jesus is Himself the Way, the Truth and the Life.

It is thought-provoking to read what Dr. Baago says (in *Dialog*, Minneapolis, U.S.A.): 'It is a peculiar fact of our time that Jesus Christ is no longer the monopoly of the organized Christian Church in India. Due to men like Rammohun Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen, Vivekananda and Gandhi, Jesus has been taken into Hinduism, also . . . Have we not reached a situation in India where it is necessary to preach the same message with respect to baptism (as Paul did with regard to circumcision), because this rite has become a kind of circumcision? Are we not to say with Paul, "Every one who has faith in Jesus Christ will be saved", and are we not to add, "In the eyes of God there is no distinction between Christian and Hindu, between baptized and unbaptized; God has broken down the dividing wall and is making us one through faith in Christ."' But, one has to be on one's guard in breaking down the building with the walls, for is not Baago's plea just the very plea that the Vedantin makes in claiming the whole world to his message of *Aham Brahmasmi*, by secretly and silently accepting Jesus also as one of the many '*īsta dēvatā*', and not openly and witnessingly, and confessingly acknowledging the Revelation

of God in Jesus, as the *Son of God.* To wipe away the distinction by scrapping a central sacrament in the manner of Baago's appeal, is to reduce Christ to a *deva* of the *aparā vidyā* level, to advocate Christian and Hindu alike to adore himself as a self-redeeming, self-sanctifying God himself, and ignore the seeking, saving, suffering, dying, rising and sanctifying God, who became Man in Jesus. Baago's proclamation is only the Hindu *samarasa sanmārga* that all *margas* lead to God, and not the proclamation of the Christian Church. The latter has to be proclaimed openly, acknowledged openly and lived out openly, and can never, never be admitted and lived out only in the individual's privacy, for the Christian proclamation is the Kingdom of God, in and through the Body of Christ.

The religious philosopher seeks to rationalize the consciousness of dependence on some theistic basis, the ecclesiastic comes into being through the urgent need for a means of reconciliation with the separated God, and the moral theologian arrives on the scene to meet the desire for some authority amid the tangled questions of practical Christian conduct (as for instance the recent loud debate on the rights and wrongs of pre-marital sexual incontinency, so much aired in books like *Objections to Christian Belief,* Penguin Books, 1965, edited by V. R. Vidler). Christian religion which is essentially a life hid with Christ in God is always in danger of being drawn down to the level of those who would reduce religion to a ritual of worship, system of thought or a fashion of life. But the fact that Jesus is His own religion, is the one guarantee of religion arriving at the perfect balance between revelation and religion, between revelation and response.

While, then, we acknowledge with humility that Christianity is not absolute, but Christ is—still, Christianity, even as a religion, in spite of its failings, has to be distinguished from all other religions, as it arises out of the Absolute Christ and His Revelation, and is, therefore, distinct from other religions, which are not so connected. Hence, we may go so far as to claim for the religion, Christianity, the closest approximation to Truth in comparison with other religions.

In a strictly metaphysical sense it must be said that no religion can claim ultimate truth. All try to express by means of symbols what is infinite and unknowable, as well as what is knowable, but has not yet become scientific knowledge. But the symbols of Christianity have proved their adaptability to 20 centuries of more varying conditions than were ever confronted by any other religion and they have grown and become enriched in the process. It seems safe to conclude, that Christianity, which symbolizes more truth for more races and more environments than any other, is the closest approximation to absolute Truth which can be attained by the mind of man through the instrumentality of religion. With the experience of future ages Christianity will become further

advanced. There may be greater changes in future doctrines, ritual and ecclesiastical organization than even the past has known. We can feel sure that the revelation of God in the worship of the Christian Church with the ever enlarging interpretations which the succeeding generations will continue to give to it, with special reference to the rapidly spreading oecumenical movements under the power of the Holy Spirit, shall continue to be the means through which men will endeavour to secure the conservation of their socially, nationally and internationally recognized values.

We do not fight shy of admitting that as a concrete religion with its roots in history, where it has grown up amidst the other religions, Christianity is like other religions a mixture of good and evil, of truth and error. Yet nothing of this ought for one moment to shake the Christian belief that Christianity is *the* religion for us; because it is not a matter of clinging to Christianity, but of clinging to Jesus Christ, to whom Christianity is attached by indissoluble ties. Certainly, it should make us more humble and more respectful of others. What is absolute is then not Christianity, but the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He has no need of our proofs. He simply reigns from the cross, even were no one to recognize the fact.

It is He who reigns and He who holds fast to us, not we who have to secure and hold fast to the absolute with our so-called proofs or self-decision. So long as this is what the Christian Church continues to proclaim and so long as she continues to urge upon men the truth that God's Revelation, God's disclosing of Himself, and that alone, meets man in his deepest need, in the impasses, of which he is barely conscious, 'of his strange impotence', and in his helplessness and self-entanglement, for just so long will Christianity, and the Christian Church with all her crying sins, continue to exist and to be the 'best' religion; not because everything about it is so very good, but because it is there that the Gospel is to be heard. And it is just this that Baago seems to forget.

Kraemer concludes his exposition of this grand theme thus:[3] 'The basic religious-cum-moral problem of man's existence, namely the disruption of his relationship to God (and so towards himself and his fellows), cannot in fact be solved by man in terms of himself or on his own initiative. That can only happen by God's initiative. The Divine Initiative has taken an historical form in Jesus Christ . . . The other religions describe themselves as "paths to salvation"; and indeed they are in the end paths which man has discovered and has made for himself. The sin of self is their radical and fundamental error in which, however, from time to time, the truth or something pretty close to it can begin to dawn. The entry of God into this human impasse is what gives its rationale, so to speak, to the

[3] Hendrik Kraemer, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-119.

idea of Revelation, which yet in its content, its factuality, is beyond all reason and all reasoning.' 'Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.'

'In saying all this I make no attempt at all to prove or demonstrate the truth of Jesus Christ. That, one can only experience by acting upon it for oneself, by taking the Man of the New Testament at His word and laying oneself open before Him. What one does for oneself is to surrender. What one can, and must do, of course, is to give testimony to Him; a very different matter from proving or demonstrating something.'

We do not come to faith through a metaphysical enquiry, scientific proof or demonstration. When philosophers attempt to prove God's existence they do not do so in a vacuum. Always at the back of their minds is a richer conception of God than that which is arrived at in the process of philosophical argument. That richer conception of course is derived from revelation. It is not for the philosopher to take the place of the theologian and preacher to attempt on his own an exposition of Christ's teachings or of the significance of the Cross. Rather it is the job of the philosopher of religion to examine the way in which the typical and central Christian affirmations fit in with beliefs which we hold in other connections, with scientific thinking, for example, and to see how the truth of religious experience can be established. In both these connections the problem of miracles is clearly important, for on the one hand belief in miracles seems at first sight to run counter to the scientific desire to banish the inexplicable. We shall not attempt a detailed examination of it here, but shall refer the reader to consult the most lucid and penetrating study that Ninian Smart has given us in *Philosophers and Religious Truth,* in his chapter, 'Miracles and David Hume'. The essential content of revelation is rightly said to be God Himself, and not general truths about God or the universe or immortality or the way of duty. The proper response to revelation is rightly said to be faith—faith, being not the intellectual assent to general truth, but the decisive commitment of the whole person in active obedience to and quiet trust in, the divine will apprehended as rightfully sovereign and utterly trustworthy at one and the same time. Faith, like revelation to which it is correlative, is therefore also a category of personal relationship and presupposes the duality of personal relationship. It cannot be pumped up by the isolated self from within itself, but must be evoked by the other presenting itself as trustworthy. Hence, faith, while always is man's deed, always sees in God its giver. The same is true of human relationship. A child's trust in his parents is their greatest gift to him, for it is evoked and sustained in him only by their continually presenting themselves and revealing themselves as trustworthy.

Apprehension of reality in the Christian faith is clearly an apprehension of the personal. The capacity to recognize and respond to the personal is given in the very structure of our beings as persons. It is not inferred by argument or analysis but is given deep in our beings, before such argument begins or after such arguments end. We know it only by revelation, a revelation which can only be accepted on trust. That is why the creed is the recital of a series of events—the acts by which the revelation was made. Faith in Christ includes the confession of His Godhead. Our souls bow down instinctively before Jesus, who has saved us and in that act of homage His deity comes home to us. The N.T. proves that such an experience is exactly parallel to the normative experience of the first disciples. We can see that in Christ's influence upon them they perceived the act of God draw near in grace. It was not that they placed Jesus alongside of God, argued next that God must be like Jesus, moved thus by syllogism from the human appearance to the Divine Reality. The matter was much more direct, vital and personal. His power told upon them overmasteringly raising them to communion with the Highest.

The divine revelation is not a complement to something already given or an addition to a knowledge of God which already existed. The uniqueness is not quantitative but qualitative—unique action of God which reveals in a unique way the 'heart of God', His Holy Love. This unique action in its longing seeking suffering dying and saving love does not complement or surpass others, but actually eliminates others. In this sense the words of Luther, '*und ist kein anderer Gott*'. are fully valid. In Him alone, the Word made Flesh, does the really new enter human life, not a mere best, but what is new in the strict sense, something hitherto unknown, because wholly concealed. Revelation is simply once for all. Just as a man can have only one father, is born once and dies once so he can only believe and know one revelation. It is possible to collate and compare a number of religions, not a number of revelations. He who says, 'Revelation' can only speak of revelation which is unique, taking place once for all, irrevocable and unrepeatable. Christ is Absolute.