

THE CHURCH OF THE  
FREE BASIS

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS  
to the General Assembly of Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches of Great Britain  
and Ireland, 1938

by

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I feel it to be my duty to deal in my presidential address with a certain issue that confronts our churches.

On the one hand, we are desirous of being on the closest terms of alliance (that we can conscientiously maintain) with the Christian churches. In a world that threatens to fall in pieces the plea is cogent that we should close up our ranks with the various Christian bodies and bear common testimony on principles. Whatever religion ours is, it has grown up in an environment that has been historically Christian. There are signs in this country (in spite of Barthianism and Calvinistic principals of Congregational colleges) of a growing liberalism in the churches. They are coming our way. Let us, it is urged, do our utmost to moderate our pace, so that we keep in step with them and be ready for the great reunion of the Christian churches when they are prepared to profess Liberal Christianity. Many of our own converts come to us from the orthodox churches. After all, we have to live side by side with the orthodox churches. When people from other churches visit ours, we want to assure them how Christian we are, using the same Bible, the same psalms, the same sort of service, and so on.

But there is another side. We may first recall that it is but a few years since the Liverpool Cathedral controversy. After the gallantry of some members of the Cathedral staff, the Convocation of York pronounced that an officially recognised Christian is one who accepts the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds and has been baptised into the name of the Holy Trinity (and the Dean of Liverpool issued an assurance that he was a loyal officer of the Church). Then there is the fact that in recent years there has been in organized Christianity a marked movement to the right in theology. Their position having been so undermined that it appeared that presently there would be nothing of historic Christianity left, orthodox Christians have retreated to consolidate. They concentrate on the intervention of God into human life. Christ was God. Mr. J. S. Whale, the President of Cheshunt (Congregational) College, Cambridge, has gone so far as to assert that Liberal Christianity is dead for ever. In fairness to Mr. Whale, he meant that it is now recognised as not allowable to pick out of the gospels the passages that suit Liberal Christians and claim that they are historical and deny that everything else is. I think that this contention is justified. But Mr. Whale and his school do not confess that they themselves discriminate in the records. There are not a

few things in the gospels that they themselves would wish away and which they silently pass over. If I may give an example of my own uneasiness, in the stories of the Gadarene swine and the draught of fishes no heed is taken of the suffering of the innocent creatures, but such heed would be essential in my conception of the Lord of All Life. To give a list of such elements in the records would be too painful. Mr. Whale and his school are, I think, right in maintaining that the earliest records of Jesus already regard him as a superhuman person, but they also tell these things about him. The dilemma is not one for us only : it exists also for Mr. Whale and those who think with him. If we are not to discriminate in the records, the dilemma becomes increasingly painful. If the world cannot have Christianity without things that are repugnant to its best judgment, that may be the reason why it is giving up Christianity.

There has been recently published the report of the Church of England Commission on Christian Doctrine which deliberated for fourteen or fifteen years. It attaches great importance to orders, and especially to the episcopate. The ink was hardly dry on the pages of this report when Lord Hugh Cecil publicly pointed out that bishops are, for all practical purposes, appointed by the Prime

Minister and that he, so far from being in the apostolic succession, might be a Presbyterian, Baptist or Unitarian. Incidentally, if God could make use of the Council of Nicaea, why should He not make use of a Prime Minister to appoint bishops? Surely the truth is that we ought to consecrate all our powers in the selection of ministers as in all our doings and find the best means for selecting them.

The liberal side of the report yields the following results. The signatories hold that the historic traditional doctrine of the Fall is now abandoned. They hold that an Anglican clergyman or layman may or may not believe in the Virgin Birth, miracles as historic occurrences, the physical resurrection of Jesus, the traditional beliefs about hell and heaven, the catastrophic ending of the world, the salvation of the elect in Christ, and the inerrancy of Holy Scripture. Only a "general assent" to formularies and forms of liturgical worship can be expected. Though a creed begin with the affirmation, "I believe," it ought to be understood that mental reservations may be made, nor ought such reservations to be regarded as dishonest. It ought to be understood that certain beliefs which were once held literally may now be interpreted symbolically.

The report of the Church of England Commission on Doctrine has had the reception

that was to be expected, its contents being what they are. *The Times* is sorry about it and has kept it quiet as far as possible. The report has been welcomed by some "orthodox" ministers. They quote with approval the theory of progressive revelation. This theory is popular now-a-days, but I venture to suggest that it is untenable. Do you believe that God *revealed* Himself as a God of Battles calling upon a chosen people to exterminate their enemies? Surely the only tenable view is that this was the idea of God that people had, not that God *revealed* it. Surely we must hold that God at all times has left nothing undone that He can do to reveal Himself, but it is the beings concerned who partly reveal and partly misrepresent His nature. We are told, just as we were told when Mr. Shaw published his *Black Girl*, that these liberalities which the report espouses have been taught in the theological colleges for a considerable time. They may have been (or they may not) but they have not been taught from the pulpits. I have put this point to orthodox ministers and have had the reply, "No, I do not consider it my duty to create doubt in my congregation." These liberalities are not of much use if they are kept to the ministers. But we now have public acceptance by orthodox ministers of liberties that Philip Wicksteed and Estlin Carpenter and John

Page Hopps and many other Unitarians suffered obloquy and even personal violence to proclaim.

Then to side with truth is noble  
 When we share her wretched crust,  
 Ere her cause bring fame or profit  
 And 'tis prosperous to be just :  
 Then is it the brave man chooses  
 While the coward stands aside  
 Till the multitude make virtue  
 Of the faith they had denied.

"At first people say, 'It is not true;' then, 'It is contrary to religion;' and lastly, 'We knew it all the time.'" H. W. Nevinson has said, "It is a high reward when the slow world comes swinging round to your despised and persecuted cause, while the oppressor ingratiatingly says that at heart he was with you all the time."

The Nicene Creed is now reduced to belief in the Incarnation. We cannot accept that. We believe that Jesus was *an* incarnation but, by his own teaching, only one. The orthodox Christians of to-day will not have it so. Apart from belief in the Incarnation, they say, there is no real religion. Unless *Christ* rose from the dead, all religion is vain and there is no future life. You must make Christ the absolute dictator of life. Such problems as those of divorce and pacifism are to be determined by whether Christ gave a clear ruling on them. This is maintained in spite of the fact

expressed by so good an orthodox Christian as Dr. Edwyn Bevan : " In the case of our earliest gospel, what we have is only what St. Mark recollected of what St. Peter recollected of what Jesus had said some thirty-eight years before St. Peter's death, and that translated from Aramaic into Greek, so that it is absurd, apart from the Church's judgment, to press every clause or every sentence in the words attributed to Jesus as if they had been taken down at the time by a phonograph or by shorthand."

Popular exponents of Christianity like Dr. Glover argue that the Christians out-thought and out-lived the non-Christians. It is broadcast that orthodox Christianity is hall-marked by the fact that it brought schools and hospitals and abolished slavery. The facts are very painfully at variance with this view—so painfully that I will again forbear to recite them in detail. Schools and hospitals abounded long before Christianity accepted them. Slavery was practised and defended by Christianity up to the 19th century. Surely it is regrettable that Christianity should be spoken for in this way. Recently the British Christian Council for International Friendship, Life and Work (an organization, by the way, that owes its origin to the Unitarian Philip Wicksteed and our National Conference Social Service Union) greatly to its

credit published a booklet by Professor Singer, Professor of the History of Medicine in the University of London, who is a Jew. In that booklet Professor Singer writes as follows :

While Jews are grateful to the work of such Christian scholars as have gone back to Jewish sources and have endeavoured to interpret them [among whom we are proud that our own Dr. Travers Herford was a pioneer] they are well aware that in the liturgies of the Churches passages are still read as inspired Scripture which Christian scholars themselves recognise to be unhistorical or even spurious ; that in certain of these passages a responsibility which is completely unhistorical is laid on Jews corporately for the crucifixion of the founder of Christianity ; and that a complete caricature of the nature of Judaism is current in almost all Christian teaching. Worse still is the manner in which these things are taught in the schools, thus preparing the minds of the young for anti-Semitic feelings. In view of such facts, and constantly faced with the misery of the Christian victims of Christian anti-Semitism, the Jew cannot but feel that to couple this indifference to truth, justice and morality with the proclamation that the Christian religion is superior in its universalism and humanity, is altogether presumptuous.

Freedom of thought is not yet adequately attained in organized religion. It has been gradually and reluctantly extended, largely under pressure of scientific and historical truth and the influence of literature. Religion is still publicly identified with orthodox Christianity and the central life of the community suffers calamitously, being either, where it is publicly identified with religion, hampered with creeds at variance with knowledge, or else divorced from conscious

recognition of religion. The openmindedness which in the United States allows Unitarians to preach university sermons and serve as university professors of theology is utterly beyond the British. Religion does not get unbiased treatment by *The Times* or the B.B.C. It appears to be ruled by the latter that religious broadcasting must be in proportion to the number of adherents of the major sects but with exclusion or virtual exclusion of others. A Spiritualist newspaper was justified in pointing out that if there had been a B.B.C. in ancient Rome, Jesus would not have been allowed to broadcast.

Surely the attitude of Christianity ought not to be "God, I thank thee that I am not as other religions are" but "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Orthodoxy is of course no guarantee of moral or spiritual goodness. We protest on *moral* grounds against the doctrine that he alone is a Christian who accepts the Incarnation. During the Liverpool Cathedral controversy, Dr. Glover, the Public Orator of Cambridge University, wrote, "I would resolutely oppose the invitation of a Unitarian, even for a single address, to any of our Baptist pulpits or to our platforms." Not long ago a Nonconformist minister excused himself from attending a service on the ground that he could not worship with a Unitarian. Both these men are

familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Public Orator ought surely to have remembered these words: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal."

It may be said against all this that there are orthodox Christians who shame us by the goodness of their lives. Yes, but there are also Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Spiritualists, Theosophists, agnostics and atheists who do the same. I must condemn the heresy that tries to make out that thinking is not a form of conduct, that if people are good in practical ethics, it does not matter if by bad thinking they are teaching what is false. This is no service to the kingdom of God but, on the contrary, the sowing of tares of evil. It is true that one may know truth and yet fail in major virtues, but why, O why should it be assumed that *because* one knows truth *therefore* one fails in major virtues? Is it impossible to combine the best intellectual truth with the best spiritual life? Have they no connexion in reality? Jesus said, "By their fruits ye shall know them." A short time ago "Janus" of *The Spectator* wrote that the late Dr. Dearmer remarked to him how strange it was that so many of the best modern hymns had been written by Unitarians! The city of Birmingham in celebrating the centenary of its

charter of incorporation recently decided to confer its freedom on four of its citizens. Three of them were Unitarians and the fourth was a Quaker.

The vast majority of our population is indifferent to orthodox Christianity. The latter is endured at school and on public occasions but is treated with silent contempt. It is possible to read in *The Times* a passage like this : " The withering away of the State plays much the same role in Soviet dogma as the Second Advent in Christian theology. It occupies an essential place in every confession of faith. But since the days of the primitive Church the prospect has not been regarded as imminent or allowed to affect day-to-day practice." The world at large has outgrown orthodox Christianity. The whole situation is classically described through the insight of Samuel Butler in his two books *Erewhon* and *Erewhon Revisited*. The vast majority of the people outside the diminishing churches have turned their backs upon them.

The world is changing far too rapidly for the churches. Germany has rejected Christianity. Russia has rejected Christianity. Italy pays it lip-service but denies it in practice. France we all know and Spain and the United States and so on.

Owing to the swiftly increasing tempo of transport and communication, *religions*

contact each other much more. The day has gone by when it was polite, let alone religious, for one religion to say to the others, " By revelation I have got the one and only truth." It is not enough to have internationalism—we must have inter-religionism. Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley, in their free quest of religion, have found Buddhism more consistent with science than Christianity is, just as Sir Isaac Newton found Unitarianism more consistent with science than Trinitarianism was, and they also find in Buddhism a wider compassion with all suffering life and a clearer insistence on spiritual discipline. Orthodox Christianity is almost inextricably identified with a cosmology that is obsolete. Evolution has made the old creationism obsolete. Mr. Stephen Graham has written : " Christianity to-day is more in disrepute because of the intellectual cowardice of the churches than through lack of individual religion." Mr. St. John Ervine, in his book, *A Journey to Jerusalem*, wrote : " At various times during the journey I asked about a dozen laymen, none of whom was what is called 'intellectual,' whether or not he believed in the doctrine of the Trinity. Not one of them did. They shared my belief that the largest single sect in Great Britain is composed of unofficial Unitarians who are to be found in almost every Christian

organization." Professor Whitehead, in his *Science and the Modern World*, has written as follows :

For over two centuries religion has been on the defensive, and on a weak defensive. The period has been one of unprecedented intellectual progress. In this way a series of novel situations has been produced for thought. Each such occasion has found the religious thinkers unprepared. Something which has been proclaimed to be vital has finally, after struggle, distress and anathema, been modified and otherwise interpreted. The next generation of religious apologists then congratulates the religious world on the deeper insight that has been gained. The result of the continued repetition of this undignified retreat during many generations has at last almost entirely destroyed the intellectual authority of religious thinkers. Consider this contrast : When Darwin or Einstein proclaims a theory which modifies our ideas, it is a triumph for science. We do not feel that here is another defeat of science. Religion will not get power until it can face change in the same spirit.

It is replied, " If all this be so, why have not the public flocked to *your* churches ?" The answer is precisely my theme—that we have so identified ourselves with Christianity in its historic tradition that the public has known us only as a form of that—retaining much of obsolete ideology and with the added disadvantage of heresy, but without having exploited the advantages of the really free basis. We fall between two stools. If the other churches draw together on the basis of the Incarnation, we become more isolated ; if they become more liberal, our stock falls.

We ought to be preparing the distinctive message of the church of the absolutely free basis.

Our theological schools are not schools for the genuine, unbiased study of religion. They start with the presumption that religion came by an arbitrary revelation on the part of God, that the study of the Bible is theology and that all other religion is " comparative religion " or philosophy of religion.

I protest with all my heart and soul and mind against the attitude that looks back to a time when God manifested Himself. Is God dead ? Did He exhaust Himself in one revelation or is more of Him to be found ? Is He accessible in contemporary life ? Have there been no genuine prophets in modern times—not second-rate prophets but prophets of the first rank ? Alas, it is always in the name of the dead prophet that the modern prophet is despised. " Ye build the sepulchres of the prophets and garnish the tombs of the righteous and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we should not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets." I can testify myself that because I have sought the light in modern prophets, because I have sought a true doctrine to take the place of the obsolete creationism, I am held not to be a theologian.