

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND MODERN PROBLEMS

BY

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PREFACE

THIS book does not really need a Preface, since the Introductory Chapter explains what I have tried to do in it. But as this is probably the last considerable work that I shall have time to write, I will take the liberty of looking back for a few moments upon what I have attempted in the service of Christian truth as I have seen it.

From the time when I was ordained priest at the age of thirty-two, I have been convinced that the centre of gravity in theology was moving from authority to religious experience, and it was this conviction which led me to the study of Christian Mysticism, the subject of my Bampton Lectures in 1899. My professional work, until 1904, was that of a Classical Tutor at Oxford, and it was therefore natural that I was specially interested in the philosophy of Mysticism, which has always been closely associated with the school of Plato. I worked mainly on this subject during the years when I was Lady Margaret Professor at Cambridge. In 1917 and 1918, a tragic and anxious time for this country and for Europe generally, I gave the Gifford Lectures, at St. Andrews, on Plotinus, the greatest name in the roll of philosopher-mystics. These two volumes, the result of many years' labour, embody the best that I have been able to offer as a contribution to the philosophy of religion.

Since 1911, my life in London has brought me into closer contact with the intellectual, social, and moral problems of our own day. As a result of the Great War, we have passed through a veritable, though happily peaceful revolution, which has shaken the foundations of our whole social and political structure. It was inevitable that after such a terrible experience all conventions, all traditions, all the convictions of the past, should be called in question. The deep discredit which that catastrophe was thought to have cast upon the old diplomacy was widely held to involve also

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the old religion. Not only was "the failure of Christianity," as proved by its inability to prevent the Christian nations from forming themselves into a mutual suicide club, proclaimed at every street-corner, but Christian Ethics, which had been almost taken for granted by the independent thinkers, philosophical as well as scientific, of the nineteenth century, were subjected to destructive and impatient criticism. In part this revolt only rendered more vocal and unabashed murmurs which had long found a subdued and half-reluctant expression. But in part there has been a real emancipation from traditions which no longer corresponded with the new scientific knowledge, and with the new aspirations of a revolutionary epoch. For better or worse, nothing is now taken for granted or accepted on authority. The morality of the New Testament must stand its trial before the conscience of our generation, to be accepted or rejected on its merits as a guide for the men and women of to-day.

To very many Christians, who find peace and confidence in the belief that their faith speaks to them with an infallible and absolute authority, this claim of the world to judge the Church, instead of the Church the world, seems arrogant and intolerable. My own belief in the Incarnation and in the abiding presence of the Spirit of Christ in the world makes me share this feeling. I have no confidence that the spirit of this age is wiser than the spirit of past ages. With all our unparalleled progress in natural philosophy and the applied sciences, there has, I think, been no intrinsic advance in human intelligence and wisdom. The lamentable condition of the arts may make us diffident about our power of penetration into the things of the spirit. And yet I have no doubt that in the unquestionable progress which the human mind has made in certain directions we have a true revelation characteristic of the age through which we are passing, and that this revelation must affect some of our ethical as well as of our philosophical traditions. A great task awaits us

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in this century. To borrow St. Paul's metaphor, the fire has come which must try the work of all the old builders, of what sort it is. The temple of God has been patched with much wood, hay, and stubble, the contributions of dishonest, ambitious, impatient builders. This must be consumed, that "the things which are not shaken may remain."

I have therefore been impelled, almost against my will, to leave the *templa serena* of divine philosophy, in order to take part in the turmoil of the street and the market-place. The storm-centre of religious controversy in post-war Europe and America is, it seems to me, the relation of the Gospel of Christ to problems of conduct. If the authority of Christ were rejected in this field, what would be left of Christianity would not be worth quarrelling over. For the Christian revelation is of a standard of values resting on an unveiling of the character of God and of our relation to Him; on this alone depends the whole scheme of Christian Ethics, which in their turn postulate the truth of the revelation in Christ.

The application of traditional morals to modern needs must be the work of many individuals, each bringing his honest and independent contribution to the task. I speak for no one except myself, and I am well aware what reception I may expect for parts of what I have written. But I have spoken throughout in perfect sincerity, and I hope that my book may do something to clarify the issues which more immediately concern us in this period of upheaval and agitation.

W. R. INGE.

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THE object of this book is to consider the relation of Christian Ethics, the norm of which, for reasons to be stated presently, I shall take to be the books of the New Testament, to the civilisation of our own time, in so far as our Western culture is moulded by conscious ideals. To what extent are these ideals or principles in harmony with the Christianity of the New Testament as a rule of life? Can the enlightened conscience of the twentieth century still look back to the Gospel of the first century for authoritative guidance, or must we admit that there has been a revolt against certain aspects of New Testament morality, as there has undoubtedly been a revolt against much of the morality of the Old Testament? It is my wish to deal with these questions in a temper of strict candour. I am writing neither an apologia for Christianity nor an indictment of modern civilisation. I shall endeavour to appreciate and do justice to the characteristic convictions of the present generation, many of which I share, though there may be others which I regret and distrust. We are in the middle of a revolutionary period, in which nothing has taken a stable, much less a final, form. As might be expected at such a time, many writers emphasise the relativity and provisional character of all ethical principles. This line of thought tends to minimise the authority and value of what Christians regard as an ethical revelation made nearly two thousand years ago. It was, we are reminded, historically conditioned; and the environment of Palestine in the first century was very unlike that of Europe and North America in the twentieth. This is a truth which I have no desire to deny or to extenuate. But there must be an absolute background against which all relative truths have to be set, if even the word relativity is to have any meaning. Every philosophy asserts and depends upon some permanent reality behind the flux of phenomena; and an ethical

religion must demand a similar absoluteness for its fundamental principles. In Ethics, as in philosophy, only the superhistorical can hold the historical together.

The idea of moral obligation is a constant, and the ultimate values on which the Christian revelation rests belong to the eternal world. But that revelation is bound up with a definite doctrine of the relation of man to God, of the purpose of our probation here, and of the constituents of a good life. If we universalise Christian Ethics too much, we may be left without any definite guidance in particular problems. It is essential that we should admit that just as Christianity, as an intellectual system, is not consonant or compatible with any and every philosophy, so Christian Ethics are based on principles which are not accepted by all moralists. This will become clear in the course of our inquiry. The Ethics of Christianity are religious Ethics; they have their centre in God. This gives them a character of their own, which makes them generically different from secularist or materialistic Ethics. We shall therefore, in the latter part of this book, come upon genuine antagonisms between Christian ethical principles and other principles which are held, with equal sincerity, by some who are not Christians. It will be a difficult but necessary part of our undertaking to disengage what is essential and distinctive in the Christian view of life, entangled as this has been with a mass of traditional morality which has at best only a local and temporary validity.

The history of moral philosophy, from the Greeks to the nineteenth-century Utilitarians, does not fall within the scope of this book. Nor will it be necessary to examine in detail different types of ethical theory, as has been done by Martineau, Sidgwick, Green, and many others. My plan is to take the Ethics of the New Testament as embodying, on this side, the Christian revelation, and to bring these into comparison with the principles which seem to underlie the theory and practice of the white races in our own day. In

this book I am concerned only with Western civilisation; I have neither the knowledge nor the space for a consideration of Asiatic peoples.

"That which is now called the Christian religion existed among the ancients, and has never failed from the beginning of the human race, until Christ came in the flesh, whence the true religion, which was already in existence, began to be called Christian." So wrote Augustine,¹ who had discovered, before his conversion, the close affinity between "the books of the Platonists" and the theology of the Fourth Gospel. The City of God, in his view, mingled with the earthly State from the creation of man, and will mingle with it to the end. Christianity has in all ages had its confessors who, it was charitably supposed, have received salvation; for the Logos was in the world under varied forms before the Incarnation. This thought, that "Christianity is as old as creation," is affirmed in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel and in the first verses of the First Epistle of St. John; it is common in the early Fathers, who had come under Platonic influence; in Augustine it is not held very consistently. It belongs obviously to an evolutionary, not to a catastrophic, view of the world's history, and for this reason it took no firm root during the long period when the dominant philosophy was supernaturalistic dualism. We moderns may be glad to find that it has a recognised, though insecure, place in early Christian thought. For we cannot be content to regard even a divine revelation as a bolt from the blue. The profoundest and most original of prophets still stands on the shoulders of those who went before him.

Christianity began with Christ in the same sense in which Platonism began with Plato, or, as Plato would have loyally protested, with Socrates. "The religion which is now called Christian" has been called Christian for nearly two thousand years, and has played a great part in history. It began as a reform movement, on the old prophetic lines,

¹ *Retract.* i. 13.

within Judaism; but it quickly decayed in its original home, and embarked on the conquest of the Hellenistic world, leaving the East to fall a prey to a typically Semitic religion, that of Mohammed. After a successful trial of strength with the imperial power, the great Church became itself a theocratic empire, and in the West followed the same course of evolution as the ancient Roman State, passing gradually from a modified democracy into a centralised despotism.

In spite of all attempts to preserve political unity, it has split up into innumerable sects, and at different times Christians have found their ideal in, or paid high honours to, such discrepant types as Simeon Stylites, Augustine, St. Louis of France, Francis of Assisi, George Fox the Quaker, General Gordon, and Howard the philanthropist. In the face of these violent and almost ludicrous contrasts, is it possible to speak of Christian Ethics at all? Is it one and the same religion which finds its ideal types now in a hermit tormenting himself like an Indian fakir, now in a learned scholar, now in a travelling missionary, now in a mystical visionary, now in a fighting man, now in a social reformer? Has not Christian morality a nose of wax, as Alan of Lille said of "authority"? Can it not be bent in any direction by the prevailing tendencies of successive historical epochs? Would it not be better to say at once that Christianity is the generic name for any religion professed by a man or woman with a white skin?

To these objections I shall try to answer that "Christian Ethics" is a name which has a meaning. I shall try to find, not a system, but a fountain of life which has never ceased to flow from its source in the life and teaching of the Founder. The river of Christianity (as Clement of Alexandria said) has received many affluents; the tree of Christianity has many branches, bearing diverse fruits of its own as well as many that are *non sua poma*; but beneath all diversities of type we can recognise, I think, manifestations

of one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will.

And yet I shall not maintain that the evolution of Christianity has been consistently (to use a biological term) orthogenetic. I shall not maintain that the Church has ever been infallible, supernaturally protected from error. On the contrary, the history of Christianity, like that of Buddhism, has been very largely a history of decline and perversion. Although in no age has the Spirit of Christ wholly deserted the society which bears His name, in no age has the Church escaped from the powerful reactions emanating from secular conditions. The persecutions, while in a sense they kept it pure, hardened its temper and stiffened its organisation. Constantly threatened with internal disruption, it was driven to progressive centralisation and repressive legislation. Its victory over the Empire was soon followed by several centuries of almost unredeemed barbarism, the most protracted and dismal retrogression which the human race has suffered within the historical period. The rediscovery of fragments of the ancient culture might seem to promise a fruitful alliance between religion and humanism; but the Renaissance quickened into activity the dormant memories of a glorious past, and made "Gothic barbarism" odious to the Latin races. This revival of classicism in Italy and elsewhere was one of the causes of the German Reformation, and of the wars of religion which followed it. The North had but little sentiment about the traditions of the Latin Empire. Thus Christendom in the West was disrupted; humanism was thrown back, and on both sides religion was narrowed, coarsened, and embittered. The Counter-Reformation remedied many abuses; but from that time onward the Roman Church has been merely Latin, not Catholic, and the Protestant Churches have suffered from the weaknesses of sectarianism. No branch of Christendom was ready to face the problems of the age of industrialism and of rapidly advancing science.

It is therefore quite impossible for me to follow those apologists who find in the institutional Catholic Church, speaking and acting through its political representatives or rulers, a real continuance of the Incarnation. The only true apostolic succession is in the lives of the saints. In trying to disengage the essence of Christian Ethics from what is accidental, I shall not be precluded by any reverence for tradition and ecclesiastical authority from finding in Church history aberrations on the largest scale, which still remain as stumbling-blocks, offending the conscience of the present age and distorting the ideal which the Gospel, when it was fresh from the mint, held up to mankind. These perversions, just because they were in accordance with the spirit of the age which generated them, have become especially obnoxious to a later time. In the difficult task of removing these morbid growths without endangering the life of the patient, the safest course for the modern Church is to return to the Christianity of the New Testament, and (changing our metaphor to one which St. Paul uses) to build afresh upon that foundation. The superstructure must be partially new, but the old foundation will suffice, when the incongruous erections which have been built upon it have been taken away.

I shall speak in detail of two distortions of the Christian religion which have had a very long and unfortunate history. The first is a one-sided exaggeration of a genuine element in Christianity, the world-renouncing and self-denying aspect of our religion. I should be the last to deny that Christianity is an ascetic creed, that is to say, that it requires us to discipline ourselves, as athletes train for a race. Nevertheless in practice the ascetic ideal led to a manner of living and thinking which has many parallels in the history of Eastern religions, but which is completely alien to the sane and genial temper of the Founder, as portrayed in the Gospels. It is plain that the entire detachment from all earthly interests, which it was the object of these austerities

to achieve, was possible only when a complete indifference prevailed about the welfare of secular society and the prospects of social improvement. The Ethics of the New Testament, it must be confessed, are open to distortion on this side. A social Gospel can be justifiably built upon the precepts of Christ and His apostles, but the attempt to reform secular society, the world which "lieth in the Wicked One," was long neglected, for reasons which must be considered in the proper place. The early Church was ill protected against the encroachments of an extreme asceticism which logically belongs to a doctrine of the impurity of matter and the sinfulness of sensuous experience, ideas which are not part of the Christian religion. Traditional ecclesiastical Ethics, especially in the unreformed Churches, retain numerous survivals of this false ideal, which come into conflict with the enlightened conscience of our time. The subject will require careful handling, because the revolt against asceticism proceeds largely from mere utilitarianism, love of pleasure, and secularism. It is, in truth, much easier to fall below asceticism than to rise above it.

The second aberration has been far more disastrous, and its evil consequences do not seem to be diminishing. I shall try to trace to its natural causes the monstrous growth of a theocratic Empire in Europe, and to show how the Ethics of the Gospel have been at every point poisoned and distorted by the insatiable claims of this terrible organisation. Even the heroic self-devotion of the gallant soldier of the Church, even the gentle piety of the cloistered nun, have been almost turned into *splendida vitia* by the arrogance, bigotry, cruelty, and fanaticism which follow inevitably from a false notion of the Church and of its proper place in the world. The Western Catholic Church presents a magnificent spectacle, but in the light of the Gospel we must refuse to recognise in the priestly Cæsar of the Vatican a true representative of the Galilean prophet. The Roman Church furnishes a very melancholy illustration of the truth

that the survival-value of an institution has no necessary relation to its fidelity to its original principles.

The Latin Church on its institutional side is the last chapter in the history of the Roman Empire; its connexion with the little flock which gathered round Christ is kept up only by the spiritual beauty of the characters which it still knows how to train. For the rest, almost all that offends the lay conscience in ecclesiastical morality—its fierce intolerance, its tortuous diplomacy, its indifference to truth, its trafficking in spiritual gifts, its refusal to recognise any moral obligations not sanctioned by its traditions and stamped by its own mint—all in a word which sets institutional Catholicism in permanent antagonism to modern civilisation—proceeds from the supposed duty of supporting through thick and thin the power, prestige, and wealth of a corporation. As against the unquestionable advantages which this fanatical institutionalism confers upon the Church as an organisation—the power of bargaining with governments and the enthusiastic support of wealthy bigots—must be set the hatred which in all Catholic lands is excited against the Church, and against the religion which it is supposed to represent. There is nothing resembling this hatred in Protestant countries, and in consequence we find in those countries a deep reverence for the character of Christ which has some influence on the conduct of many who never attend a place of worship. To take our own country as an example, Christianity as a leaven has a great though indefinable influence upon the character and moral ideals of the English people. In Catholic countries the people are, in common speech, either “devout” or “free-thinkers,” and the free-thinker is usually untouched by any moral influences proceeding from Christianity. It seems to me that the political power of a highly organised Church is too dearly purchased at this price, and that our Lord’s parables indicate that He meant His message to mould society in a very different manner. Only when it is recog-