

THE MEANING OF CHRISTIANITY*

CHANGING somewhat the meaning, we may apply to Père Lagrange what St. Paul says of himself: "To the Greeks and to the Barbarians I am a debtor." In his work *Le Sens du Christianisme d'après l'Exégèse Allemande*, now translated into English under the title *The Meaning of Christianity according to Luther and his Followers in Germany*, he is concerned to show how the effort to create a distinctively German religion, which should be imposed upon the rest of the world by the ascendancy of the German peoples and of their culture, was doomed to failure; but at the same time he does not forget to discharge a simple debt of justice.

Rome, the heiress of the ancient civilization and the teacher of the Christian faith, he reminds us in his Preface, educated the German barbarians; and Germany brought new forces to Rome. In the great body of Christendom, Germany represented a distinct civilization—distinct, indeed, but one which was not isolated. Even after Luther, Germany, for a long time, seemed as careful to maintain her place in the concert of European nations as she was to show independence of Rome. Even when, at the end of the eighteenth century, she made up her mind to keep more to herself, she yet sheltered her own renaissance under the genius of Shakespeare, and Goethe urged her to draw from Greek sources a sense of proportion and of form, to borrow from the French Theatre its nobility and its beauty. However, Germany's tendency to free herself from all outside influences finally prevailed. After having broken with the Church,

* *The Meaning of Christianity according to Luther and his followers in Germany*, by the Very Rev. M. J. Lagrange, O.P., translated by the Rev. W. S. Reilly, S.S. (Longmans, 7s. 6d. net).

Landmarks in the History of Early Christianity, by Kirsopp Lake, D.D. (Macmillan, 8s. 6d. net).

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she broke with mankind. National pride was unleashed, and indulged in the insensate dream of a culture which should be all the more perfect for being intensely autonomous, the unhindered product of an elect race, exclusive of all foreign contributions. In this vast design, which ended only in a regression towards their former barbarism, their exegesis of the New Testament, that is, their explanation of the most ancient documents concerning Christian origins, played a part* (pp. 9-12).

But even to these Barbarians† Père Lagrange does not hesitate to proclaim himself a debtor. The Dominican Biblical School at Jerusalem, of which he is the head, has indeed been charged with having too much regard for German science. "We have," he acknowledges quite simply (p. 20), "made much use of German works, especially of those which were not theological, confessing frankly both that they were ahead of our own and that we were anxious to catch up with, and even to surpass them." And this acknowledgment is, after all, only justice. No doubt Germany's grammars and dictionaries are more solid than the theories which she is never tired of spinning; at least then give her credit for those. Germans, at any rate, have worked; acting, as Père Lagrange happily puts it, in that mass formation with which they are familiar, they know how to resign themselves to the toil of collecting little facts, of taking note of the texts relating to a given subject—in a word, they at least show in the

* This is to be understood of non-Catholic German exegesis; the exegesis of German Catholics is not treated of.

† In what sense Barbarians? "The quite unique barbarism of Prussia goes deeper than what we call barbarities. . . . The Greeks, the French and all the most civilized nations have indulged in hours of abnormal panic or revenge. . . . The Prussian begins all his culture by that act which is the destruction of all creative thought and constructive action. He breaks that mirror in the mind, in which a man can see the face of his friend and foe." (G. K. Chesterton, *The Barbarism of Berlin*.)

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study of Scripture the quality which William James attributes to them in *Psychology*, the incapability of being *bored*.

The marvellous effort made by German scholars has failed, and the Church has faithfully retained the old interpretation of the documents. But what part have Catholic scholars played in the affair? "To a certain extent, no doubt, the work of Catholic critics has contributed to the triumph of the Church's dogmatic interpretation; but, unless I am mistaken, only slightly. The work of Catholic Scriptural scholars in defence of the Church's interpretation has not equalled, either in intensity or in the copiousness of its products, that of independent critics; and what Catholics have done by positive achievement to forestall attacks is still less creditable" (p. 13). If the time wasted in the denunciation of the Germans had been spent in copying their patient and persevering application, in emulating their intellectual curiosity, the sweet reasonableness of the Catholic interpretation of Scripture would not be the unknown thing that it is.

It should be clearly understood that these lectures of Père Lagrange treat of *exegesis*. There is no question of estimating the religious or moral value of Christianity to mankind, of discovering the light and strength it can bring to our souls. No, it is a question of studying the most ancient documents that we possess dealing with the origin of Christianity, of finding out from these texts how it actually did arise, in what it first consisted, and how it was understood by those who adopted it. Confronted with those documents, especially the Gospels, the Epistles of St. Paul, the Acts of the Apostles and the Apocalypse of St. John, the Church gives one explanation of them. German scholars give other explanations, quite at variance with hers, but reached, it must be added, after intense efforts made with all the resources of

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modern science. Let us select, out of the many positions successively taken up by German critics and examined by Père Lagrange, the three most recent which still dominate the minds of many calling themselves Christians :

(1) The Church reads in the Gospels that Jesus revealed Himself to His chosen disciples as the Messiah promised to the Jews ; that He founded a reign of God which had a visible and external aspect ; that He claimed and had supernatural powers ; that He even declared Himself the Son of God, one with His Father.

From their examination of the documents many Germans, generally known as Liberals, assert (we neglect shades of difference and give the main lines) that Jesus either did not claim to be the Messiah, or taking a title that was current used it to express a meaning of his own ; that he taught that the more we know and love God the more we deserve to be called His sons and that he, Jesus, was in this sense pre-eminently the Son, and the Messiah ; that the reign of God which he preached meant simply a righteous state of soul ; that he did not possess supernatural powers ; that Jesus' true greatness consists in this, that he preached and practised an ethic of supreme and permanent value to all men.

(2) The Church interprets the Gospels to mean that in the Kingdom or Reign of God, which formed the main subject of Jesus' preaching, He distinguished two things—the reign of God which was imminent, and the kingdom of eternal life prepared for the just after death ; that since God in a very true sense reigns on earth in so far as men do His will, the reign of God was about to appear on earth in a new and far more perfect phase, because it was to have a head in the person of Jesus, through whom God would be better known and loved, whose life, death, and resur-

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rection indeed were God's supernatural and decisive intervention to establish that Reign in power before the death of men then living ; that Jesus did not think that this Reign coming in power would involve the end of the world, but on the contrary would, by providing helps for the better service of God, serve, during a period of time He did not define, to prepare souls for that Kingdom of Heaven reserved for the just after death ; that Jesus in His glory was to be head of that perfect Kingdom of Heaven to be inaugurated by the general judgment, the day of which He did not reveal.

On the other hand a school of critics, awkwardly labelled Eschatologists (eschatology treats of what relates to the end, "the last things"), asserts that it is plain from the Gospels that when Jesus announced the Reign of God as about to begin during the lifetime of His contemporaries, He meant that the end of the world and the general judgment were at hand ; that His aim was not to set up on earth those supernatural helps which would enable men gradually to learn to love and serve God, but His rôle was to die, and to appear immediately after his death as a glorified Messiah, or Son of Man, to judge mankind ; that the only reign of God Jesus announced was, in short, a reign of absolute innocence and happiness, Heaven replacing earth immediately and as a whole.

(3) The Church maintains that from the New Testament we may gather that Jesus commanded that His chosen disciples, with Peter at their head, should continue His work after His death by preaching that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, through whose death and resurrection remission of sins and salvation had been won for men ; that He intended that all who accepted this faith and desired this salvation should form a society, mystically united to Him by Baptism, the rite of initiation, and the Eucharist, the rite of His

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body and blood, and grouped also under the authority of the Apostles, from whom the community received its faith ; in a word, that the Christian religion is the work of Christ, carried on by the Apostles under the new form required by His departure.

A modern school of critics claims that Christianity is a fusion of Judaism and Paganism, that indeed it owed to pagan mysticism almost as much as to Judaism. "Christianity had been profoundly changed by its passage from Galilee to Jerusalem ; whereas the teaching of Jesus had been the announcement of the Kingdom of God, the illustration of its character, and the insistent call to men to repent, the central teaching of the disciples in Jerusalem became the claim that Jesus was the Messiah. But the passage from Jerusalem to Antioch had produced still greater changes. After all, the teaching of the disciples in Jerusalem contained no elements foreign to Judaism. . . . In Antioch, on the other hand, much that was distinctly Jewish was abandoned, and Hellenistic thought adopted, so that Jesus became the Divine centre of a cult. . . . Christianity became a Græco-Oriental cult, offering salvation, just as did the other mystery religions . . . From the standpoint of the historian of religions Baptism is the combination of a Jewish ceremony with Græco-Oriental ideas. . . . When Jesus offers men salvation by eating his flesh and blood in the Eucharist, this is the teaching of the Hellenised Church, not of the historic Jesus." We take these sentences from a recent book, *Landmarks in the History of Early Christianity*, by Dr. Kirsopp Lake, an Englishman. For though the above three anti-Catholic theories are German in origin, they are not confined to Germans ; indeed, the last is finding in English-speaking countries energetic supporters, none more so than Dr. Lake.

We repeat, it is a question of exegesis, that is, each theory purports to be an explanation of our most

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ancient documents touching Christian origins. Which explanation is right? Doubtless the partisans of each theory would make Dr. Lake's words their own: "The facts are plainly visible, and would be plainly seen by all, were it not for the general tendency of ecclesiastical scholarship to consult the records of the past only to find the reflection of its own features" (p. 2).

The ordinary reader may be inclined to ask why there is any difference of opinion at all in the interpretation of simple documents like the Gospels, and why in any case there are still differences after so many centuries of study. Well, in the first place, the simplicity of the Gospels is more apparent than real; their difficulty often escapes the ordinary reader because, having already the Catholic interpretation in his mind, he unconsciously makes rough ways plain by its aid. But suppose he had to interpret the Gospels without that aid. Exegesis would then require great skill and patience. The texts are ancient. It is necessary "to endeavour to enter into the author's mind by the study of the ideas of his time and of his preoccupations; to get at the writer's sources, seize his allusions to things and persons, place actions in their setting, that is to say, reconstruct the life of a period which will ever be strange to us. This difficulty of projecting oneself into the past is such that scholars do not always agree about the interpretation of a verse of Horace. But at least they generally agree in the case of the classics. Why is it not so in the domain of the New Testament? Because the consequences are so different" (Lagrange, p. 26).

In a masterly introductory chapter on *The Exegesis of the Catholic Church*, Père Lagrange answers the question what are her methods and what guarantee they offer, even from the mere human point of view, that she does, after nineteen centuries, preserve the primitive

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meaning of Christianity. First and foremost she *converses* with the first Christian community; she is the same society, continues the primitive community by an uninterrupted tradition. She admits, just as unreservedly as did the Protestants of old, the authority of the New Testament as to the original meaning of Christianity, but she adds thereto the information conveyed by tradition. "For it is very clear that the faith was preached before the primitive Christian thought of writing, and that the writings we possess call for this complement. The Gospels are but a part of the teaching given by the Apostles concerning the life and miracles of Christ, concerning His Passion and Resurrection. These facts were interpreted in a certain way; they had consequently a Divine meaning which the Gospels do not develop, and which the Epistles of the Apostles take for granted rather than enunciate clearly" (p. 37). Neither tradition nor the Bible may be isolated. "It should not seem unlikely to a scholar that the Church, which has celebrated the Eucharist from the first hour of her existence, offers the best commentary on the words of consecration" (p. 45). Individual Catholic commentators have their faults—a tendency to find in Scripture explicitly what is really there only implicitly, a disregard of the exact historical meaning of words in their context, an inclination to excessive harmonization—but such is not the case with the Church. Why should she torture texts to get from them what she can get from tradition? Why should she deny the characteristic shades of meaning in each Gospel, when she is aware that, since each came from the same society and that society herself, it can but be a question of shades of meaning, and not of substantial differences. "Primitive Christianity will never be understood so long as people refuse to treat it as a society" (p. 46). And the Church "interprets as a

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society what was the doctrine of a society, a society which is none other than herself perpetuated in time” (p. 51).

Of the three anti-Catholic and un-traditional theories described above that of the Liberals is clearly a compromise. Strauss, whose *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* was translated into English by George Eliot, had changed nearly the whole contents of the Gospels into myths, but the Liberals at least broke with Strauss. For, to their credit be it said, they had no desire to break altogether with Jesus; they were at least drawn to Him as the highest religious genius, as teaching an ethic which still satisfied the deepest needs of the soul. In their search for a Jesus that the modern world might accept, they leaned chiefly on St. Mark (but, so one German critic maintains, without having read him) as being the least dogmatic of the Gospels, eliminating or softening down the miraculous and supernatural elements that even he preserves. And what was the result? A creation after their own image and likeness, a professor of ethics, a respectable pastor perhaps, but certainly not the Jesus of the Gospel. The incident of Palm Sunday alone is surely sufficient to dissolve the Liberal compromise. Of the Messianic character of the scene there can be no doubt*. Those who explain away Jesus' claim to be the Messiah and make of Him a sage and in some sense a prophet, must suppose either that this Messianic character has been added after the event to an unimportant incident, or that Jesus was not responsible for the manifestation, but suffered it without protesting. Then, of course, the events become unintelligible. The fact is that Jesus deliberately intends to appear as the Messiah, and therefore chooses an entry that is undeniably Messianic,

* Cf. for the whole scene Lagrange, *Évangile selon S. Marc*, p. 273.

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since it reproduces one of the clearest Messianic texts (Zach. ix. 9), but at the same time an entry that is most humble. It is usual, indeed, to speak of the magnificence of Jesus' triumphal entry, on the plea that for Easterns the ass is a noble animal, etc. As a matter of fact the Rabbis were embarrassed by this text of Zacharias, and at a loss to explain how the Messiah could be satisfied with such a humble train. A donkey is still a donkey even in the East, and hardly as a rule for a full-grown man a seat that lends to dignity. By entering Jerusalem astride a donkey, amidst the acclamations of the crowd, Jesus carries out a clearly Messianic entry but a lowly one, and when the Liberals meet Him, it is they, not He, who become self-conscious and embarrassed.

On the other hand, the system of the Eschatologists is more objective. It is well constructed and inherently plausible; its exponents bring forward some striking texts as its basis, and insist that these texts must be taken literally as they stand in their context. Did Jesus believe that the world was about to end? This system says He did, and in proof appeals to Jesus' instruction when He sends out the Apostles (Matt. x. 23), and to the discourse on the taking of Jerusalem and the end of the world (Mark xiii.). It is not to be denied that the difficulty is a real one. "I confess," says Père Lagrange (p. 287), "*that for my part I do not know how to solve either difficulty if the order in which the words of Christ are given be considered as inviolable*, as attested by the Holy Ghost. What can we answer to the objection based on the words from Jesus' charge: "You shall not finish all the cities of Israel till the Son of Man come?" The Apostles returned, and the Son of Man had not yet manifested Himself. He had, of course, come upon earth, but this was before the mission of the Apostles; Jesus was speaking of His glorious manifestation. It did

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not take place before their return." Criticism itself supplies the answer, for it recognizes that St. Matthew sometimes groups in one discourse sayings uttered on various occasions. Here, too, he has combined two instructions into one discourse. And the same solution applies to the discourse represented as delivered within sight of Jerusalem, announcing the ruin of the city and the coming of the Son of Man. We have here two perspectives brought near together because both deal with a judgment of God (p. 289).

And, be it noted, this explanation suggested by the structure of the passages themselves, is the only explanation which agrees with the *whole attitude of Jesus*: "The parables simply cannot be made to say that the reign of God will exist only at the end of the world" (p. 290). The Liberals are right at least in accusing the Eschatologists of giving a wrong interpretation of the parables.

What of the third system, the theory that Christianity is an amalgam of Judaism and Paganism? Anti-Catholic as it is, it is still more anti-Protestant. It finds in St. Paul what the Catholic Church has always found in St. Paul, supernatural grace as a participation of the Divine nature, the sacramental action of Baptism *ex opere operato*, the real presence of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. It is certainly piquant that St. Paul, the Apostle beloved of Luther, and the foundation of Protestantism, should now be handed over to Catholics, and by the Germans themselves. Certainly "we are nearing a time when men must accept Christianity in the Church, such as she understands it, or renounce Christianity" (p. 347). And is it not plain that the Church's Christianity is really Jesus' Christianity and not simply Paul's? Does Paul claim to *found anything*? Does he not, for instance, write to the Romans (vi. 3): "Know ye not that all we who have been baptized in Christ

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Jesus, are baptized in His death?"—that is, he supposes that the mystical union with Christ in His death effected by Baptism was known to them simply because they were Christians. And if Paul, or anyone else, had attempted to introduce a new doctrine (and an astounding one, too), such as the Eucharist is represented to be, into that early society so jealous of its faith, is it conceivable that that society would have received it, or received the writings in which it was expressed?

With the Liberals, then, we find in the Gospels a Jesus who reveals the priceless value of the human soul, a teacher of an ethic of supreme and permanent value, a preacher of a Reign of God which, at least in one aspect, consists in the love and service of God. With the Eschatologists we take literally Jesus' affirmations about the supernatural character of His person, but we add that He declared Himself the Son of God, one with His Father, and we believe these declarations; with them too we say that Jesus expected a supernatural intervention to establish the reign of God, but we place this intervention in His life, death and resurrection, and refuse to limit this reign to a catastrophic coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. With the third theory we acknowledge the realism of St. Paul in the doctrine of grace and of the sacraments, but we refuse to exaggerate it and confuse it with magic. We refuse also to attribute the origin of Christianity to St. Paul. "The disciple is not above His master." In reading such a book as Dr. Lake's one is struck at once by one fact, that Jesus no longer counts, He is simply not seen. There are in it many acute and just observations (for instance, on the Jewish idea of the Kingdom of God), but the one thing that counts, the thing that depends, not on learning but on that large sense for seeing things as they are, is not there. (What is seen is merely an . . . an excellent Jew.) Now the

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decisive point is this, that " no criticism of the texts, no elimination of the testimonies, no declaration against the authenticity of the Gospels or the Epistles suffices to take away from the figure of Jesus its supernatural character. If you do not reject absolutely all, like the mythicists, if you retain a residuum, however little, of the historical tradition concerning Jesus, it must be admitted that He held and manifested claims to a supernatural rôle and that He died for having done so. . . . You have to resign yourself to insult Him if you are not decided to adore Him " (Lagrange, p. 377).

One-sided, that, as Père Lagrange says, has ever been the note of German exegesis and its English followers— one-sided, incomplete, narrow, superficial. In this book Père Lagrange shows the penetration and the sanity that are always his. He sees things clearly and he sees them whole. Whereas the Barbarians discover one idea and give it free rein, subordinate everything to it, he has " a heritage that comes to us from scholasticism which itself inherited from Aristotle and Socrates the habit of distinguishing concepts, of defining them and then arranging them in good order. . . . We want all the elements to agree, all conclusions to show themselves legitimate by the good accord which they maintain with one another " (p. 367). " To the Greeks as well as to the Barbarians I am a debtor."

LUKE WALKER, O.P.

