Christianity and Democracy

Looked at from the outside, a religion seems to be a cult and a body of doctrine. It seems to be a cult; that is, a collection of specific acts to be performed, and of special ideas to be cherished in consciousness. The acts, the cult, may be more or less prescribed, more or less detailed, more or less formal, but some special acts there must be. It is these acts which have religious meaning, which are worship, while other acts are outside the pale, are secular, or profane, commercial, or merely moral—they are not communion with God. So, too, the dogmas, the doctrine, may be more or less narrow, more or less rigid, but it seems there must be some special body of ideas set up and apart as belonging to the religious consciousness, while other ideas are scientific, or artistic, or industrial. This is the appearance. Research into the origin and development of religion destroys the appearance. It is shown that every religion has its source in the social and intellectual life of a community or race. Every religion is an expression of the social relations of the community; its rites, its cult, are a recognition of the sacred and divine significance of these relationships. The religion is an expression of the mental attitude and habit of a people; it is its reaction, aesthetic and scientific, upon the world in which the people finds itself. Its ideas, its dogmas and mysteries are recognitions, in symbolic form, of the poetic, social and intellectual value of the surroundings. In time this significance, social and intellectual, is lost sight of; it is so thoroughly condensed in the symbols, the rites, the dogmas, that they seem to be the religion. They become

an end in themselves. Thus separated from life they begin to decay; it seems as if religion were disintegrating. In reality, the very life, the very complexus of social and intellectual inter-actions which give birth to these forms, is already and continuously at work finding revelation and expression in more adequate relations and truths.

If there is no religion which is simply a religion, least of all is Christianity simply a religion. Jesus had no cult or rite to impose; no specific forms of worship, no specific acts named religion. He was clear to the other side. He proclaimed this very setting up of special acts and institutions as part of the imperfections of life. “The hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet in Jerusalem worship the Father. . . . The hour cometh and now is when true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth”—the hour when worship should be simply the free and truthful expression of man in his action. Jesus had no special doctrine to impose—no special set of truths labeled religious. “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine.” “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.”

The only truth Jesus knew of as religious was Truth. There were no special religious truths which He came to teach; on the contrary, his doctrine was that Truth, however named and however divided by man, is one as God is one; that getting hold of truth and living by it is religion. Dr. Mulford in his Republic of God, holds that Christianity is not a religion at all, having no cult and no dogma of its own to mark it off from action and truth in general. The very universality of Christianity precludes its being a religion. Christianity, Dr. Mulford contends, is not a religion but a revelation.

The condition of revelation is that it reveal. Christianity, if universal, if revelation, must be the continuously unfolding, never ceasing discovery of the meaning of life. Revelation is the ascertaining of life. It cannot be more than this; it must be all of this. Christianity then cannot stand or fall with any special theory or mode of action with which men at a given time may choose to identify it. Christianity in its reality knows no such exclusive or sectarian attitude. If it be made to stand or fall with any special theory, histori-
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For centuries the visible church assumed that it was the guardian and administrator of truth in these matters. It not only strove against the dawning and rising science as false, but it called this science impious and anti-Christian, till science almost learned to call herself by the name so positively and continuously fixed upon her. But it turned out then as ever—truth exists not in word, but in power. As in the parable of the two sons, the one who boasted of his readiness to serve in the vineyard went not, while the younger son who said he would not go, went out into the vineyard of nature and by obedience to the truth revealed the deeper truth of unity of law, the presence of one continuous living force, the conspiring and vital unity of all the world. The revelation was made in what we term science. The revelation could not be interrupted on account of the faithlessness of the church, it pushed out in the new channel.

Again, I repeat, revelation must reveal. It is not simply a question of the reality declared, it is also a question of comprehension by him to whom the reality is declared. A Hindoo religion, a Greek religion, might place its religious truths in mysteries which were not comprehended. A religion of revelation must uncover and discover; it must bring home its truth to the consciousness of the individual. Revelation undertakes, in a word, not only to state that the truth of things is such and such, it undertakes to give the individual organs for the truth, organs by which he can get hold of, can see and feel, the truth.

To overlook this side of revelation is to keep the word but deny the fact. Of late, the theologians, as well as the philosophers, have been turning their guns upon agnosticism, the doctrine that God, and the fundamental realities of life, are hid from man's knowledge. What is true for one must be true for another, and if agnosticism is false, false also is the doctrine that revelation is the process by which an external God declares to man certain fixed statements about Himself and the methods of His working. God is essentially and only the self-revealing, and the revelation is complete only as men come to realize Him.

So much for the first part of my subject. Christianity is revelation, and revelation means effective discovery, the
actual ascertaining or guaranteeing to man of the truth of his life and the reality of the Universe.

It is at this point that the significance of democracy appears. The kingdom of God, as Christ said, is within us, or among us. The revelation is, and can be, only in intelligience. It is strange to hear men call themselves Christian teachers, and at the same time condemn the use of reason and of thought in relation to Christian truth. Christianity as revelation is not only to, it is in man's thought and reason. Beyond all other means of appropriating truth, beyond all other organs of apprehension, is man's own action. Man interprets the Universe in which he lives in terms of his own action at the given time. Had Jesus Christ made an absolute, detailed and explicit statement upon all the facts of life, that statement would not have had meaning—it would not have been revelation—until men began to realize in their own action the truth he declared—until they themselves began to live it. In final analysis, man's own action, his own life movement, is the only organ he has for receiving and appropriating truth. Man's action is found in his social relationships—the way in which he connects with his fellows. It is man's social organization, the state in which he is expressing himself, which always has and always must set the form and sound the key-note to the understanding of Christianity.

Jesus himself taught that the individual is free in his life because the individual is the organ of the absolute Truth of the Universe. I see no reason for believing that Jesus meant this in any but its most general sense; I do not see any reason for supposing that he meant that the individual is free simply in some one special direction or department; I do not see any reason for supposing that his teaching of truth's accessibility to man is to be taken in any unnatural or limited way. Yet the world to which these ideas were taught did not find itself free, and did not find the road to truth so straight and open. Slaveries of all sort abounded; the individual found himself enslaved to nature and to his fellows. He found ignorance instead of knowledge; darkness instead of light. These facts fixed the method of interpretation for that time. It was impossible that the teachings of Jesus should be understood in their direct, natural sense when the whole existing world of action seemed to contradict them. It was inevitable that these teachings should be deflected and distorted through their medium of interpretation—the existing conditions of action.

The significance of democracy as revelation is that it enables us to get truths in a natural, every-day and practical sense which otherwise could be grasped only in a somewhat unnatural or sentimental sense. I assume that democracy is a spiritual fact and not a mere piece of governmental machinery. If there is no God, no law, no truth in the Universe, or if this God is an absentee God, not actually working, then no social organization has any spiritual meaning. If God is, as Christ taught, at the root of life, incarnate in man, then democracy has a spiritual meaning which it behooves us not to pass by. Democracy is freedom. If truth is at the bottom of things, freedom means giving this truth a chance to show itself, a chance to well up from the depths. Democracy, as freedom, means the loosening of bonds, the wearing away of restrictions, the breaking down of barriers, of middle walls, of partitions. Through this doing away with restrictions, whatever truth, whatever reality there is in man's life is freed to express itself. Democracy is, as freedom, the freeing of truth. Truth makes free, but it has been the work of history to free truth—to break down the walls of isolation and of class interest which held it in and under. The idea that man can enact "law" in the social sphere any more than in the so-called "physical" sphere simply shows with how little seriousness, how little faith, men have taken to themselves the conception of God incarnate in humanity. Man can but discover law by uncovering it. He can uncover it only by freeing life, by freeing expression, so that the truth may appear with more conscious and more compelling force.

The spiritual unification of humanity, the realization of the brotherhood of man, all that Christ called the Kingdom of God is but the further expression of this freedom of truth. The truth is not fully freed when it gets into some individual's consciousness, for him to delectate himself with. It is freed only when it moves in and through this favored individual to his fellows; when the truth which comes to consciousness in one, extends and distributes itself
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to all so that it becomes the Common-wealth, the Republic, the public affair. The walls broken down by the freedom which is democracy, are all the walls preventing the complete movement of truth. It is in the community of truth thus established that the brotherhood, which is democracy, has its being. The supposition that the ties which bind men together, that the forces which unify society, can be other than the very laws of God, can be other than the outworking of God in life, is a part of that same practical unbelief in the presence of God in the world which I have already mentioned. Here then we have democracy! on its negative side, the breaking down of the barriers which hold truth from finding expression, on its positive side, the securing of conditions which give truth its movement, its complete distribution or service. It is no accident that the growing organization of democracy coincides with the rise of science, including the machinery of telegraph and locomotive for distributing truth. There is but one fact—the more complete movement of man to his unity with his fellows through realizing the truth of life.

Democracy thus appears as the means by which the revelation of truth is carried on. It is in democracy, the community of ideas and interest through community of action, that the incarnation of God in man (man, that is to say, as organ of universal truth) becomes a living, present thing, having its ordinary and natural sense. This truth is brought down to life; its segregation removed; it is made a common truth enacted in all departments of action, not in one isolated sphere called religious.

Is the isolated truth about to welcome its completion in the common truth? Is the partial revelation ready to die as partial in order to live in the fuller? This is the practical question which faces us. Can we surrender—not simply the bad per se—but the possessed good in order to lay hold of a larger good? Shall we welcome the revelation of truth now going on in democracy as a wider realization of the truth formerly asserted in more or less limited channels and with a more or less unnatural meaning? As democracy comes to consciousness itself, becomes aware of its own spiritual basis and content, this question will confront us more and more.

We are here in the University to think, that is to say, to get hold of the best tools of action. It is our duty not to float with the currents of opinion, but to ask and answer this question for ourselves in order that we may give some answer when others begin to ask it. Will the older formulation, inherited from days when the organization of society was not democratic, when truth was just getting its freedom and its unity through freedom,—will this formulation strive and contend against the larger revelation because it comes from what seems to be outside its own walls, or will it welcome it joyously and loyally, as the fuller expression of its own idea and purpose?

It is your business and mine to answer this question for ourselves. If we answer it for ourselves we shall answer it for more, many more than ourselves; for it is in our hands and in the hands of such as we are, to get this question decided beyond a peradventure. There is no better time than the present for the solution; there is no better place for it than the University of Michigan—an institution based upon inquiry into truth and upon democracy. Can anyone ask for better or more inspiring work? Surely to fuse into one the social and the religious motive, to break down the barriers of Pharisaism and self-assertion which isolate religious thought and conduct from the common life of man, to realize the state as one Commonwealth of truth—surely this is a cause worth battling for.

Remember Lot's wife, who looked back, and who, looking back, was fixed into a motionless pillar.