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THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

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- No. 1—RELIGIOUS HISTORY AND ESCHATOLOGY
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- No. 2—COMMUNISM, CHRISTIANITY AND HISTORY
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THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST*

ENJOYING the hospitality of a Christian home after a service, I was browsing through the books of my host and noticed a small volume on the Second Advent of Christ, the title and author of which were unknown to me. My attention was arrested by an incident narrated at the beginning of the book. An acquaintance of the author had lately become aware that the Bible spoke much of the Return of Christ and the end of the world. She was not a little perplexed and wished for guidance on the subject, but living in the country it was difficult to obtain the information she wanted. At length, a garden party was arranged in her village in aid of a well-known Christian society and a clergyman from London addressed the gathering. The women resolved to put some questions to him. "Sir," she asked at the close of the meeting, "do you believe there will be a Second Advent of Christ?" "It all depends on whether you believe in a First Advent," he replied. The woman was so astonished, puzzled and shocked, she could not bring herself to ask anything more, and the clergyman unfortunately offered no explanation of his enigmatic remark. The author of the book shared the indignation of his lady friend at the apparent scepticism of the cleric and proceeded to elaborate his views.

What a pity the visitor from London did not elaborate his views! For he had evidently given thought to the matter. It is quite true that if Jesus was born a mere man *and no more*, if He lived on a purely natural plane and in His death for ever disappeared from history, then we cannot strictly speak of a first *advent* of Christ—He did not come, He was merely born—and to talk of a second advent would be to entertain a baseless superstition. The nineteenth century rationalists clearly saw this and exploited the position. David Strauss was particularly annoyed at this element of the teaching of Jesus. "Such a thing as He here has prophesied of Himself cannot come to a man," he wrote concerning the Second Coming of Christ. "If He has prophesied the like of Himself and awaited it, then for us He is a fanatic; if He had uttered it of Himself without any real conviction, then He was a braggart and a deceiver."† The violence of this language is unusual, even for Strauss, but in a calmer mood he explained himself: "We see therein (i.e. the expectation of a coming to judgment) an unallowable self-exaltation that a man (*and only of such a one do we speak here*) should let it get into His head to except

* An address originally given, with some excisions, to the Baptist Union Assembly of 1951, under the title of "The Lord of History." The title was one of a connected series and to some extent conditioned the presentation of the argument. The chief topic dealt with, however, is the Second Coming of Christ, and the booklet is issued at the request of many, under this title.

† *Das Leben Jesu für das deutsche Volk bearbeitet*, 1864, p. 236.

Himself from all others in such a way that He sets Himself over against them as the future judge; in this respect Jesus must especially have forgotten that He once had refused the predicate 'good' as one alone allowable to God."*

On Strauss's presuppositions his viewpoint is justified. But once grasp the Christian estimate of Jesus, see in Him the Incarnation of God, and the position is wholly different. The birth of Jesus is seen to be an *advent*, He is God *manifest* in the flesh. That incarnation, with its redemptive death and resurrection, is the clue to all history; it shows that God's revelation to man, and His purpose of grace for man, are wrought entirely through the mediation of Christ. The New Testament sees not only redemption as the work of Christ, but all that prepared for it and all that issued from it were alike in His hands. Both John and Paul, the writer to the Hebrews and the Seer of Revelation, all teach that the creation itself was brought into existence by His agency (see e.g. John i, 1-2, Col i, 16, Heb. i, 2, Rev. iii, 14). The illumination of the ancient heathen races and the revelation to Israel were similarly by the operation of the Logos Son, according to the Prologue of John's Gospel (John i, 9f.). That process reached its climax in the eternally valid redemption achieved by the Son of God, whose death was a ransom for all (1 Tim. ii, 6). The benefits of that redemption are appropriated by man solely as he submits himself to that self-same Son. The New Testament is but consistent with itself in maintaining that the consummation of this age-long outworking of the purpose of God will also come to pass through the deeds of Christ. As God *began* history through Christ, as He *makes* history through Christ, so will He *end* history through Christ. In the Biblical perspective the Second Coming of Christ is as necessary as His creative and redemptive work, and in theology it cannot be otherwise.

The Cardinal Assertion of Christian Faith

We are thus led to the characteristic element in the Christian view of history, viz., that *the crucial event which illuminates all events has already taken place*. The meaning of history was revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The crowning moment of His ministry, His crucifixion-resurrection, was at once the occasion of our redemption and of His exaltation as Messianic Lord. The Kingdom of God came in power then, for the King then entered on His sovereignty. In the words prefacing the Great Commission, He claims, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. xxviii, 18). "God hath highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name," said Paul to the Philippians. "God put all things in subjection under His feet," he wrote to the Ephesians.

* Ibid., p. 242.

This fact involves two consequences: (i) that Christ even now in this world exercises His sovereign power to judge; (ii) that Christ even now in this world exercises His sovereign power to save. The same consequences are deducible from the divine claim, "I am Alpha and Omega." In plain English that should read, "I am A and Z," and means, "I am the beginning, and I am the end, and I am all that matters between." When the Jews said that Adam broke the law from A to Z they meant that he transgressed the whole of it; just as, when Abraham was stated to have kept the law from A to Z, they meant that he observed it in its entirety. The title "Alpha and Omega" is applied in the first chapter of Revelation to God and in the last chapter to Christ (Rev. i, 8 xxii, 13); it thus signifies that God in Christ is active in all history, in the beginning and the end and all between.

When we speak of God as Saviour, we tend to think of God saving individual men from the guilt and power of sin. This is true, but not the whole truth. When God brought Israel from Egypt at the Exodus He dealt with a nation, irrespective of the worth of its individual members. Amos said He does the same kind of thing with other nations. "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?" The implication of these famous questions is that God is concerned with all nations as much as ever He was with Israel and that He has always acted accordingly. Was not that the basis of our hope at Dunkirk, when we prayed for the deliverance of our men, and did we not believe it was vindicated when they were brought to safety? Does providence work only in war time? And does it not apply internationally? Or are we all British Israelites!

Note, however, that the other aspect is also true. If God in Christ saves, He also judges the nations. That is writ large in the Old Testament, and if it is not plainly written in the New Testament, it is rather because it is assumed than denied. Let it not be forgotten that when the New Testament writers speak of the messianic judgments that were to come on the world, they were thinking primarily in terms of the peoples of their own day. Cullmann infers from this that the signs at the End of the age are but intensifications of that which is characteristic of all history. Christ will not act capriciously at the End, He will act in accordance with all that He has ever done.*

The Lord, then, is busy to-day in both judgment and deliverance. For the Christian that should inspire both confidence and repentance.

* *Le Retour du Christ*, 1948, pp. 30-31.

Christ and the Future

The *climax* of the continuous redemptive and judicial acts of the Lord will be the *manifestation* of His sovereignty and the supreme *exercise* of it.

An extraordinary feature of the kingdom of Christ in this age is its hiddenness. His judgment, though real, is not perceived. His salvation is equally incomprehensible to the majority. That a Christian man is risen in Christ must sound strange to the ears of an unbeliever, while even for the believer it is an act of faith that the Church in its present condition is really the "people of the saints of the Most High" and the heir of the ages. Above all, God's vindication of the righteousness of Christ in His resurrection, and the reality of His exaltation to the throne of God, are unknown to the mass of men. It is the teaching of the New Testament that the hidden is to be made known, the glory is to be revealed, that "every eye shall see Him." Hence, one of the terms for the Second Coming of Christ is *epiphaneia*, the manifestation or appearing of Christ: what He is, He shall be seen to be, Messianic Lord, Son of God, Saviour and Judge of men. That occasion will also be the "revelation of the sons of God" for which creation waits (Rom. viii, 19).

This revelation of Christ's sovereignty will be, as all God's revelation, by *action* among men, by deeds of judgment and deliverance. The importance of the Second Coming of Christ lies here, that the victory of the kingdom, equally as its inauguration, will be through the action of Christ. We are commissioned to preach His gospel, to build His Church, to obey His commands, to offer worship, to make all life, as Paul put it, a "rational liturgy." But the defeat of the last enemy, and of many another, is not within our power. There are some victories which only the Lord of life can win. To a realistic theology that is a source not of weakness but of strength; for what we cannot do, He will; what He alone must do, He shall do—at "His appearing and His kingdom."

It is at this point that many Christians hesitate, but is this not the carrying through of the Christocentric emphasis of our Faith to its logical conclusion? The necessity for doing this has been realised by theologians of all shades of opinion. Schleiermacher, e.g., asserted that "the Church cannot attain to completion in the course of human life on earth," that much more, "the perfection of the Church as the cessation of its fluctuating life and growth is possible only through a leap," and that this leap "can certainly be regarded only as an act of the royal power of Christ."* The Tübingen New Testament critic, Weizsäcker, said of Jesus, "His

* *Der christliche Glaube*, 2nd ed., 1831, 157, 160.2.

whole proclamation of the kingdom rests on this pre-supposition, that the entire present is the beginning of a future glory. In this respect, however, Jesus remained the same, for He did not begin with dogma but with life: His position in respect of the future is a necessary consequence of His position in the life of the present.”* Weiffenbach expressed a similar sentiment later when he wrote: “The progress, coming and triumph of His kingdom in the power of the Spirit, and the coming, victorious exaltation and triumph of His person are, with Jesus, correlatives: the great and new thing that distinguished Him from the prophets is just that inward binding up of the destiny of His cause with that of His person.”† Coming nearer our own time, Paul Althaus is characteristically emphatic: he writes on the one hand, “Christian faith means the certainty that in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen One, God’s sovereignty has broken into the world,” and on the other, “Jesus Christ, as faith knows Him, is promise. The content of the promise is nothing other than Jesus Christ Himself.” Hence, “faith in Christ waits on the coming again of Jesus Christ, whom it knows.” To Althaus the major contribution of the Biblical apocalypses is summed up in the sentence, “Christ is Lord and goal of history,” in their insistence that He alone can achieve that purpose and in the confidence that He will do it.‡ Finally let us quote Cullmann, whose works are so widely read and discussed at the moment. He states: “The hope of the New Testament cannot be other than hope in the return of the Lord, if, as we have tried to show, the entire message of the New Testament culminates in Christ, Saviour of men and of the cosmos, beginning, middle and finish of the whole history of salvation from the first to the new creation. Christ, in being Mediator in the past and present, must also be that in the future. . . . To hope, according to the New Testament, can then only be to hope in His return.”§

It is surely not without significance that theologians so different in outlook as these, covering a complete century of theological thought, are so unanimous in their expression of the Church’s final hope. This is Christian Faith, not mere “Second Adventism,” and we must hold it fast.

To hold fast this hope, however, is not to claim to be able to answer every question about it. “Behold, He cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see Him.” How can Christ make His presence universally known, and that, not only for a moment,

* *Untersuchungen über die evangelische Geschichte*, 1864, p. 479, n.1.

† *Die Wiederkunftsgedanke Jesu*, 1873, p. 26.

‡ *Die letzten Dinge*, 1st ed., 1922, 5th ed., 1949, pp. 29, 38, 265.

§ *Le Retour du Christ*, 1948, pp. 19-20.

but continuously? We cannot tell. But let not this be felt to be an insuperable difficulty, for our ignorance here is matched by our ignorance in regard to most of the ultimate facts concerning Christ. If any man feels that Christ's first coming is easy to understand but His Second Coming is a complex matter, let him try to depict to his own and others' satisfaction how the Incarnation of God in Christ took place, and he will find himself confronted with an insoluble problem. Similarly, we find ourselves completely baffled when we try to imagine how our Lord's resurrection occurred, what happened to His physical frame, and the nature of His resurrection body. If these things are difficult for us to grasp, after the Christ has come, how could any Jew of, say, 50 B.C. have described from the Old Testament scriptures the redemption of the Messiah so shortly to take place, despite the manifest congruity of that redemption with those scriptures? Granting the greater plainness of the New Testament teaching as to the Messiah, have we ever yet faced the difficulty of interpreting apocalyptic language? We have an unusual instance of the relation of vision to event in Rev. xii. There is portrayed a vision of a woman clothed with the sun, the moon at her feet and twelve stars as her crown. A seven-headed, ten-horned dragon waits to devour her child, and he throws to earth a third part of the stars of heaven. The child is born, but rapt to heaven in safety before the dragon can harm it, and the woman flies on a borrowed pair of wings into the wilderness. Without the history to go on, it would have been very difficult to extract from that the birth of our Lord in humble circumstances in the Messianic community of Judaism (=the woman), His ministry, His death at their hands, and resurrection, the subsequent replacing of the Jew by the Church and its persecution by the might of Rome. Of course the picture was never framed to that end, but by the time John had finished with it, every Christian recognised his meaning. He goes on to tell of a war in heaven; Michael and his angels fight the dragon and his hosts, and the latter are cast out of heaven. A voice in heaven declares that the sovereignty of God and of His Christ have come and that the brethren overcame through the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony: the close parallel with John xii, 31f., assures us that this relates to the power of Christ's atonement and the victory it inspires in the lives of Christians. The defeat of the powers of evil is not really by Michael and his angels but by the Christ and His servants. Again, this is a fresh application of apocalyptic imagery, and John knows his readers will understand; but could they, or we, have done so without the prior knowledge of what it was about? This ought to make us cautious in our reading of that which is portrayed as future: that it has a meaning we have no doubt, and we can get much nearer to it than many imagine, but that we can reduce eschatological mystery to plain English is a claim we cannot substantiate, any more than John could have put it in plain Greek if he had been asked!

The Issues of the End

One last point: the victory of the kingdom is sure, Christ will Himself achieve it; but where will it issue, in heaven, or on earth? Will it include history, or end it? The Book of Revelation declares it will embrace history. It is the only book in the New Testament which explicitly contrasts the victorious kingdom in this world with the final kingdom of the new creation. Is this progressive or retrograde thinking? Is it Christianity or Judaism? Many unhesitatingly accept the latter alternative. It should nevertheless be considered of some weight that our foremost interpreter of apocalyptic writings, R. H. Charles, states it as his conviction that this doctrine of the kingdom in the Book of the Revelation is its most important contribution to Christian thought. It claims *all* history for Christ.

The doctrine of a this worldly kingdom has been universally derided in the Church, almost as much, in fact, as were the Anabaptists! But suppose we define it with Theodore Häring: "The expectation of a coming preliminary perfection of the kingdom of God on earth through the immediate intervention of the exalted Christ." What is there of "crass Judaism" in that? Is it not the goal and hope of all missionary endeavour? If theologians are ashamed of the term "chiliasm" (i.e. the doctrine of a thousand-year kingdom on earth, though no one presses the *thousand* years), philosophers think otherwise: Kant described his view of the future as "philosophical chiliasm," with deliberate reference to the Book of the Revelation, though denying the necessity of the Second Coming of Christ. The heretical sects have played havoc with the doctrine and made some minds shrink from any form of it. But most significantly of all, the doctrine discarded by the Church has been taken up by the Communists and put in the fore-front of their programme. The Church is faced by the ironic fact that the greatest threat to its existence since primitive times comes from a secular redemptive-religion, whose driving force derives from a view of history perverted from the one book of the Bible which Christians have virtually refused.

Dr. Maldwyn Edwards has alluded to this in a recently published pamphlet entitled, *The Communist Millennium*, in which he declares that, as a Jew, Marx was almost certainly acquainted with Jewish apocalyptic writings, if only through the Old Testament. But Dr. Edwards does not go far enough. Thirty years ago Fritz Gerlich, in a book apparently unknown in this country, showed quite conclusively that the roots of the Communist view of history are in the Christian doctrine of an earthly kingdom of Christ.* The direct dependence of Marx on the Christian philosopher Hegel is known by all. But Hegel himself was dependent on his predecessors. The view of progress in history

* *Der Kommunismus als Lehre vom tausendjährigen Reich*, 1920.

which we find in Hegel, Fichte and Kant was fundamentally derived from Lessing. Not even Lessing, however, can finally claim the credit for the idea of the advancing purpose of history; he got it from the German Pietists (similar in outlook to our modern Fundamentalists), who were millenarians. Lessing believed that the history of the human race is divided into three periods, its childhood, youth and manhood, corresponding to the Old Testament period, the New Testament period, and the emerging fulfilment now impending; this teaching is the direct adaptation of the millennial teaching of the Biblical exegete Bengel as mediated by his philosopher disciple Crusius.*

Not only is this dependence on Christian teaching indirect: it would seem that some of the moulders of Communist thought went directly to the New Testament for their teaching. Listen to Wilhelm Weitling, whose works were being devoured by the French populace before Marx became a Communist: "A new Messiah do I see coming with the sword, to realise the teaching of the first. He will be placed through his courage at the head of the revolutionary army and with it will bring to ruins the rotten structure of the old social order, he will lead the flood of tears into the sea of forgetfulness and change the earth into a Paradise." And again, "You poor, deceived, but good natured people! Sleep on, till the trumpets and alarm call you to the last judgment. . . . Then sweep away the men of Wittenberg and Rome, who preach about thrones and sacks of gold to mock your nakedness. Then will unity lift up the standard of neighbourly love in your countries, your young men will fly with it to the ends of the earth, and the world will be transformed into a garden and mankind into a family."† Here is not simply a development of ideas through successive thinkers but direct adaptation of Christian eschatology, an eschatology discarded by the Christian Church.

We have to ask whether it is good enough to answer the aspirations of men like these with the assurance that the Kingdom of God will achieve its goal in the new creation, after the dissolution of this one. We have also to ask whether that answer does justice to the prayer taught to the Church by its Redeemer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth as it is in heaven*." If God is interested enough in history to judge it, may He not be interested enough in it to redeem it? It does not seem a hope unworthy of the Incarnate Lord, whose humanity henceforth endures unto eternity, that a time may come when, in the words

* See Gerlich, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-151. Readers of Cullmann's book, *Christ and Time*, will recognise this division of history into three by the creative, redemptive and consummating activity of Christ as fundamentally the same.

† *Die Menschheit wie sie ist und wie sie sein sollte*, Paris, 1838. This book is not accessible to me but it is quoted by Gerlich, pp. 207-8.

of Auberlen, "the State, art and culture will be truly Christian," always providing that we remember that this will be achieved not through natural laws of human progress, but through the deeds of Christ.

Althaus,* in his treatment of the nature of the divine judgment, pointed out that theologians for a long time tended to neglect the reality of the present judicial activity of God in Christ in the sphere of history; it was left to the poets to revive it, whence theology must take it again to itself and find a place for it in its system. May there not be a parallel in this instance also? Can it be that the Church, having surrendered an important item in its earlier eschatological teaching, only to see it revived in a perverted form in an atheistic system, is being called of God to give it its true place and form in its teaching as to the future?

Whatever we may think on this matter, it is important to recognise that the *final* goal is certain. The Apostle summed up the prospect before us in the immortal words: "He must reign, till He hath put all enemies under his feet. . . . And when all things have been subjected unto Him, then shall the Son also himself be subjected unto Him that did subject all things unto Him, that *God may be all in all*" (1 Cor. xv, 25f.).

He must reign—let that inspire confidence in all our service.

He shall judge—let that inspire urgency in our testimony.

God shall be all in all—let that inspire our praise!

In the words of F. W. H. Myers:—

Yea, through life, death, through sorrow and through sinning,

He shall suffice me, for He hath sufficed:

Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,

Christ the beginning, for the *end is Christ*.

* *Die letzten Dinge*. Any reader of this work will recognise my indebtedness to it, and I gladly acknowledge it. It is earnestly to be desired that this brilliant treatise on the Last Things should be made available to English readers.

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