

IS ONE RELIGION AS GOOD AS ANOTHER?

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The prevalent viewpoint in the world today *is* that of religious indifferentism. Everyone has heard people say “One religion is as good as another.” “It doesn’t matter much what a man believes as long as he does what is right.” It had its unconscious origin in the principle ushered into the world by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century—namely, the principle of the supremacy of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures and as a guide in the religious life. Luther’s example became infectious. Soon Calvin, Zwinglius, Hus, and others proceeded to give their own divergent interpretation to Scriptural texts, and thus established creeds of their own. The process has continued down to the present day, until there are now several hundred conflicting sects destroying the last vestige of unity in the ranks of Protestantism.

It will be the aim of the writer to discuss the subject in a calm, impersonal manner, seeking to cast light and not heat upon it. While at times he may feel compelled by the laws of logic to dissent vigorously from the principles of *indifferentism*, he has nothing but sentiments of goodwill and affection for the *indifferentist*. Educated people understand that questions of this nature may be discussed in a frank, honest manner, with a complete absence of ill-will, and with nothing but sentiments of friendliness and affection. It is in this spirit that the writer undertakes the discussion of this question. He asks but one favour of the reader—to enter the discussion with an open mind.

Let us now examine the philosophy of religious indifferentism to see whether or not any rational person can be logically justified in holding it. We shall bring it to trial first before the bar of reason, and then before the tribunal of divine revelation.

Opposed to Logic and Common Sense

In maintaining that one religion is as good as another, regardless of how much the various religions differ from one another, the indifferentist makes an assertion which is opposed to the very first principle of logic and common sense as well. It is a law of logic that contradictory statements cannot be true at the same time. If one statement is true, then all the statements which contradict it are false. Deny this principle of logic and you deny all possibility of correct human reasoning.

Thus, for example, a teacher holds before a class of fifteen pupils a sheet of white paper, asking each pupil to state the colour of the paper. He hears fifteen divergent answers. One says it is “blue”; another, “red”; another, “purple”; another, “yellow”; another, “green;” and so on down to the fifteenth pupil, who alone says it is “white.” Let us suppose that the teacher has so much affection for every member of his class, that he would tell them that they are all correct, rather than that they are all wrong save one. Suppose, then, that he were thus to address them after the fashion of the indifferentist: “Children, you are all equally correct. You who say it is purple, you who say it is red, you who say it is green, and all the rest of you are equally correct with the pupil who says it is white. Each one of you is correct, and no one of you *is* wrong.” While one might not be disposed to question the affection and large-heartedness of such a teacher, everyone would be compelled to question his sanity. In giving full rein to the impulses of the heart, he stifles all the dictates of reason and common sense. He is able to agree with these fifteen divergent answers simultaneously only at the cost of intellectual suicide.

Is it not passing strange how people will recognize the validity of this elementary principle of logic in all the practical concerns of their daily life, and then upon entering the domain of religion promptly proceed to throw it overboard? Yet that is precisely what the indifferentist does. He attempts the same impossible “mental gymnastics” as the teacher above described.

Do not the various denominations differ from one another . just as obviously and flagrantly as the pupils did in their answers? Thus, in answer to the question, “How many persons are there in God?” the Unitarian replies, “Only One,” while the Methodist answers, “Three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” Is it possible for any person to say in reply: “I agree with both of you. You are both correct?” Not without destroying all possibility of correct human reasoning.

Differences in Doctrine of Sects

This instance of difference in doctrine between the Methodist and the Unitarian can be paralleled on down the line among all the creeds. For each sect constitutes a distinct denomination only because it differs on some one or more important doctrines from all the other creeds. Thus, Baptists reject infant baptism as invalid, while Lutherans regard it as valid; Catholics believe that the Holy Eucharist contains the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Our Saviour, while Presbyterians regard Holy Communion as merely a symbol or reminder of Christ.

These are the differences which our Holy Father, Pius XI, in his encyclical on “True Religious Unity,” on January 6, 1928, points out as frustrating all effort of Pan-Christians at attaining real unity. “Though what agreement,” he asks, “could men of opposed opinions become one and the same society of the faithful? How, for example, can they who affirm that sacred tradition is a true source of divine revelation and they who deny it become members of one Church? They who hold that an ecclesiastical authority formed of bishops, priests, and ministers is divinely constituted, and they who assert that little by little it has been introduced through conditions of time and events? They who adore Christ really present in the Most Holy Eucharist, by that wonderful change of bread and wine called transubstantiation, and they who say that the Body of Christ is present there only through the sign and the virtue of the sacrament; they who hold that in the Eucharist there is a sacrifice and a *sacrament*, and they who say that it is only a remembrance or commemoration of the sufferings of Our Lord? They who believe it good and useful to pray to the saints reigning with Christ, and above all to Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus, and they who pretend that such a form of worship is wrong because it draws from the honour due to Jesus Christ, “the one mediator of God and men.” (Cf. I Tim., ii, 5.)

“In such great differences of opinions we do not know how a road may be paved to the unity of the Church save alone through one teaching authority, one sole law of belief and one sole faith among Christians. Moreover, we know how easy is the path to neglect of religion, to indifferentism, and also to modernism, which holds the very same error, to wit: Dogmatic truth is not absolute but relative; it is proportionate to the different needs of times and places and to the various tendencies of the mind, since it is not based upon an unchanging revelation, but to be accommodated to the life of men.”

Consequences Are Far-Reaching

From these fundamental differences in doctrine there flow practical corollaries of far-reaching consequences. For if the Unitarian be right when he says Christ is a mere man, then the Anglican who esteems Him as divine and so adores Him becomes guilty of idolatry. By the same token, if the Anglican is right, then the Unitarian who denies His divinity, and refuses to worship Him as divine, but treats Him as a mere human, become guilty of blasphemy. In other words, the proposition of the indifferentist, that all creeds are equally good, means in its concrete significance that vice is as good as virtue, falsehood as good as truth, and idolatry as good as true worship. It means the obliteration of all objective criteria for the determination of truth and the negation of all human reason.

There may be some, however, who should say that the principle of the indifferentist that one religion is as good as another is valid if applied to the various denominations of Protestantism to the exclusion of Catholicism. Even this expedient will not avail. For while the principle of private judgment is basic among all Protestant sects, yet they differ from one another in the objective doctrines in which they profess to believe. Thus the pathetic complaint of Theodore Beza, one of the early reformers of the sixteenth century, is as true now as when he uttered it. “Our people,” he bewails, “are carried away by every wind of doctrine. If you know what their religion is today, you cannot tell what it may be tomorrow. In what single point are those churches which declared war against the Pope united among themselves? There is not one point which is not held by some of them as an article of the faith and by others rejected as an impiety.” (Epist. ad Aud. Dudit.)

Christ Was Not An Indifferentist

Time was when Christians were willing to follow the example of their Divine Master and His apostles in braving torture *and* death itself rather than deny or even modify the tenets of their religious faith. For their refusal to deny Christ

and offer *incense* to the idols of pagan Rome, thousands of Christians *in the* first three centuries were thrown into the Roman amphitheatre, to be torn limb from limb by the savage beasts of the arena, while thousands of others were coated with pitch and tar and burned alive to illumine at night the gladiatorial contests of the Romans.

For, still fresh in the minds of these early Christians was that memorable scene wherein Christ had set them the example of unswerving loyalty to the truths of a supernatural revelation at the cost of life itself. The dramatic scene was enacted before the high priest, Caiphas, in the crowded court room of the Jewish Sanhedrin, on the eve of His death. Caiphas, rising up from his seat, addressed Christ with the challenging words: "I adjure Thee by the living God, that Thou tell us if Thou be the Christ, the Son of God." (Matt. xxvi, 63.)

Now, there was a law among the Jews that subjected to capital punishment the person who claimed divine honours. Christ knew full well that if He answered that question in the affirmative He was sealing His own death warrant. He knew also that if He would but deny His divinity the Jews would have no legal charge against Him, and He could escape the impending tragedy. In the face of this knowledge, without equivocation or evasion, but with rapier-like precision, the Master answered simply and clearly: "Thou hast said it." And forthwith they led Him out to be crucified.

Hence Christ went to His death upon the ignominious cross rather than save His life by modifying in the slightest degree one single tenet of His teaching. That was the example which loomed up before the minds of the Christian world for centuries, prompting them to an unfaltering loyalty to His teachings, causing them to regard orthodoxy of faith as of supreme importance, and to preclude the acceptance of the viewpoint that it is a matter of comparative indifference as to whether one accepts, rejects, or modifies the teachings for which Christ died.

The procedure of Christ in refusing to soften or tone down His answer to the question of Caiphas to suit the prejudices of the Jewish Sanhedrin is typical of His manner of teaching during His entire public ministry. It is clear, therefore, that Christ Himself was no indifferentist.

Indifferentism in the Light of Revelation

Let us inquire now if Christ imposed the same obligation upon His disciples and all those who would come to the knowledge of the faith through their teaching. In other words, did Christ command the apostles to teach His exact doctrine, and impose upon their hearers the obligation of accepting those doctrines taught by the apostles? If Christ issued this dual command, then religious indifferentism stands condemned before the tribunal of divine revelation.

Let us examine, therefore, the very words with which our divine Saviour establishes His Church and commissions the apostles to preach the gospel. To obviate many objections from our non-Catholic readers, the texts will be taken from the Protestant version of the Bible. These are the words of Christ to the apostles: "All authority hath been given unto Me in heaven and on earth. Go ye, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I command you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. xxviii, 18-20.) "And He said unto them, Go ye into *all* the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and *is* baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned." (Mark xvi, 15, 16.)

From these words of Christ, a twofold obligation is evident. First, the apostles are commissioned to preach the gospel to all nations without exception. Christ came to save the souls of all mankind. He wanted His religion, therefore, to become the universal religion of the whole human race. If any race or even any individual would refuse to accept His religion, the aim and purpose of the divine revelation would to that extent be frustrated.

Secondly, Christ imposed upon the apostles the obligation of teaching the same identical doctrines which He had taught them: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I command you." In other words, the apostles were not to teach different doctrines in accordance with the divergent whims and fancies of each individual. On the contrary, they were charged to teach "all things whatsoever" Christ had delivered unto them. They were given no liberty to teach one doctrine and reject another. The entire Christian gospel hung together as one great organic whole. This they were to impart, without omission or addition, without change or mutilation, to the whole world.

Having established the fact that Christ charged His apostles to teach the same identical truths to all nations, the question may still remain in the minds of some as to whether Christ made the acceptance of the gospel message obligatory upon the hearers or left them free to accept, modify, or reject the same. It will become evident upon reflection, however, that Christ could not logically confer upon the apostles the moral power and authority of preaching the gospel to the multitudes without placing upon the latter the correlative duty of accepting it. For every right implies a corresponding duty on the part of another to respect that right. Hence the solemn delegation to the apostles of the moral power of teaching with authority would be meaningless and contradictory if Christ did not impose the corresponding obligation on the part of the hearers to receive the message thus conveyed.

Belief in Christ's Teachings—A Command

We shall not content ourselves, however, with this answer to the question—an answer clearly implied in Christ's mandate to the apostles. For Christ Himself has put in explicit form the duty on the part of the hearers, which is implicit in His commission to the apostles. For, after His charge to the apostles, He clearly defines the duty of the auditors of the gospel message by adding immediately: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned." From these clear words of Our Divine Master it is apparent that He gave to the auditors no more freedom to reject the teachings than He gave to the apostles to modify them. He had come upon earth to reveal these supernatural truths, and He made it as mandatory on the part of the listeners to accept the revelation as it was mandatory for the apostles to preach it. The exponent of the theory that it does not matter much what a man believes finds, therefore, that his theory is the direct opposite of the teaching of Christ on the necessity of believing the precise doctrines which He committed to the world through the teaching of the apostles. Not only does Christ insist upon the acceptance of His divinely revealed truths by every hearer, but He makes it the indispensable condition for eternal salvation.

Christ did not stop, however, with commissioning the apostles to teach His doctrines. To counteract any impression on the part of the apostles that they were not able correctly to present His truths, and to remove any misgivings that might be felt by the hearers on the ground that the apostles, being human and fallible, might unconsciously mislead them, the divine Master hastened to assure the apostles of His abiding presence and ceaseless assistance, saying: "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. xxviii, 20.) "But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you." (John xiv, 26.) Hence, while the apostles of themselves were fallible, Christ gave them the assurance that in the mission of preaching His doctrines He would be with them all days, safeguarding them from error and stamping their teachings with the seal of His own divine approval. For, in the same manner as the Father had commissioned Him, so He authorized them, saying, "As the Father hath sent Me so I send you."

Christ Emphasized Unity of Faith

Moreover, this same absolute oneness of faith and religion, implied in Christ's commission to His apostles, is inferred with equal clearness from every reference which He makes to His Church. That Church He always speaks of as one, not as many. He speaks of it as one family, one fold, one city, one kingdom. He builds it upon one foundation, the rock, which is Peter. He appoints but one supreme pastor to feed His lambs and to guard His sheep; but one vicar to whom He gives the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. He seems to have multiplied illustration upon illustration, and figure upon figure, in order to impress upon His apostles the absolute necessity of unity in the faith.

So insistent was Christ upon unity of faith that the gospels portray Him emphasizing this truth in season and out of season. Thus, on the very eve of His Passion, He made it the special object of His prayer: "Holy Father, keep them in Thy name which Thou hast given Me; that they may be one, even as We are." (John xvii, 11.) To make it apparent that He intended this unity not only for His apostles but for all the countless multitudes who in the ages yet to come would believe in Him, Christ added the significant words: "Neither for these only (the apostles) do I pray, but for them also that believe in me through their word; that they may all be one." (John xvii, 20.)

This dominant emphasis of Christ upon the necessity of unity of faith is re-echoed by the apostles in their teaching ministry. Faithfully, indeed, did they discharge the sacred mission entrusted to them. With steadfast loyalty to their Divine Master, they exemplified that unity in their own lives and counselled their followers to hold fast to that same unity of faith. Thus the indefatigable apostle of the Gentiles writes to the Ephesians: "I, therefore, the prisoner *in* the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith you were called. . . . There is one body and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one Faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." (Ephes. iv, 1-6.)

St. Paul Condemns Lack of Unity

It is evident, therefore, that the great apostle of the Gentiles, in common with the other apostles, regarded a distortion or modification of any part of the divine revelation as deserving of the severest censures. Of the indifferentist who asserts that doctrinal differences are inconsequential, as all creeds are about equally good, St. Paul says in effect: "Let a man who preaches to you a doctrine different from the gospel delivered to you by Christ and the apostles, be shunned as a heretic, who would pervert your faith. Let him be regarded as a most insidious danger to your true faith, and if such a one after the first admonition still persists in his heresy, he is to be excommunicated from your midst." These words may sound stern, but they are no more so than the words of the gentle Jesus: "He that believeth not, shall be condemned."

Salvation Outside the True Fold?

The question may be asked, "Does the Catholic Church believe, then, that all persons who are not members of her fold will be condemned?" Here a distinction is necessary. There are members of the *body* of the Church, and members of the *soul* of the Church. Those are members of the body of the Church who formally profess her faith, are visibly united to her in public worship and in the reception of her sacraments. Those, on the other hand, who, through no culpable negligence of their own, do not know that the Church is the true Church, but who believe that they are members of the true Church and who live up to the lights of their own conscience, are said to be members of the *soul* of the Church. In contrast with these are those who are convinced of the truth of the Catholic Church, but who for some selfish reason fail to profess their faith in her. It is only of these latter, who remain out of the Church, in bad faith, until death, that the Church teaches that the words of Christ apply: "He that believeth not, shall be condemned."

Of course, there rests upon every rational human being the obligation of seeking to find out the true Church. A matter which involves such far-reaching consequences demands the careful study and prudent investigation of everyone. Moreover, it is the view of the Church that every person who, with an open mind and without prejudice, investigates in a careful and impartial manner the evidence of her claims to be convinced of the truth of those claims. For the objective evidence she presents is simply overwhelming to the person who looks at it with an eye single to the facts. In the few cases where conviction does not occur, the result will be found to be traceable to subjective circumstances, such as latent antagonism and prejudice, which may be unconsciously present, as a consequence of having been taught from one's early youth to regard the Church with hatred as an evil institution.

While salvation is possible for those who are only members of the soul of the Church, every effort should be made to win them to membership in the body of the Church as well. Why? Because such persons do not avail themselves of the great aids to salvation which Christ offers in His sacraments—especially Penance and Holy Communion. True, perfect contrition without the Sacrament of Penance will remit sin. But the fact, nevertheless, remains that these two great sacraments are powerful aids divinely established to facilitate the fulfilment of the Christian's supreme task, the attainment of eternal salvation. To bring the beneficent ministry of these two great sacraments to the non-Catholic, and even to the person who may be said to be in the soul of the Church, constitutes the mainspring of Catholic missionary endeavour.

The Life of the Religious Parasite

A final question remains. "How is it, then," asks the person affected by the viewpoint of the indifferentist, "if mem-

bership in the true religion is so essential for eternal salvation, and therefore presumably for right living, that there are persons who are not members of the Church of Christ, but are professed atheists, who yet lead good lives and are highly respected citizens?" The answer is to be found in the fact that such persons, living in a society permeated with Christian ideals, are profoundly influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the moral standards and the code of ethics inspired by the teachings of Christ. It will usually be found, upon analysis, that every trait which commends them in the eyes of their fellow-citizens is traceable to the standards of conduct inculcated by the religion of Christ. They are good citizens, not *because* of their atheism, but *in spite* of it.

Suppose a boy were to take his sled to the top of a hill two blocks long, and then coast down. After he has reached the bottom of the hill his sled still continues to travel rapidly along the level ground. If a person standing a block beyond the bottom of the hill were to see the youngster gliding rapidly over the level ground and did not raise his eyes to perceive the hill in the background, he might hold the following soliloquy: "What a marvellous invention that must be! A sled that is drawn by no horse, nor propelled by a motor, that yet travels rapidly along on level ground!" The mystery would fade away, however, when once he raised his eyes to the hill in the offing. whence the sled derived its momentum and energy. Coasting along now on even ground, it is travelling on *borrowed* power. So it is with the irreligious person living in a society saturated with Christian ideals and standards. He is running on borrowed power; consciously or unconsciously he is influenced at every turn by the group standards, which are in the main the result of nineteen centuries of leavening by the Christian religion.

Such a person is essentially a moral parasite. As Balfour, in his *Foundation's of Belief*, observes: "Biologists tell us of parasites which live, and can only live, in the bodies of animals more highly organized than they..... So it is with those persons who claim to show by their example that naturalism is practically consistent with the maintenance of ethical ideals with which naturalism has no natural affinity. Their spirit life is parasitic; it is sheltered by convictions which belong not to them, but to the society of which they form a part; it is nourished by processes in which they take no share. And when these convictions decay, and these processes come to an end, the alien life which they have maintained can scarce be expected to outlast them."

Difficulty of Reclaiming Irreligious Persons

Furthermore, when a person without any religious belief falls from the path of rectitude, the task of reclaiming such an individual is immensely more difficult than in the case of his religious neighbour. Why? Because there are so comparatively few functional incentives that can be brought to bear upon his conscience. If the ten commandments be regarded as but temporary laws evolved out of the consciousness of the Semitic race, which have become obsolete, if God's existence is questioned, and the fact of immortality is denied, what basis for the observance of the moral law remains? The individual knows that he can escape the penalty decreed by the civil law, as well as the social opprobrium which generally falls only upon the culprit so awkward as to be detected *in* his misdemeanour.

With the person of definite religious faith, however, the case is different. Here there is an abundance of supernatural incentives which spring directly from the Christian religion. Unlike the ones decreed by civil legislation, and which are dependent for their efficacy upon clumsy, fallible human agents for their enforcement, the sanctions of religion are applied with unerring certainty by the all-seeing eye of Almighty God. The religious-minded individual may be said to have, therefore, a policeman always with him in the form of his own conscience.

Hence a religious faith helps not only to restrain an individual from falling, but also to reclaim him if he has violated a moral law in spite of the protests of his own conscience. The true Christian may, under stress of temptation, fall into the worst vices of the pagan, and give the lie to his high profession. But no matter how low he may fall, he falls *from a standard*, and you may appeal to him. He has once climbed up the mount of God, and he knows that with God's help he can again reach the summit. But if a man feels confident that every lapse is due merely to the evil of environment, a taint in the blood, or the impelling force of a stronger will, he will not answer your appeal to higher things. He calls evil good, and good evil.

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