

## ARE ALL FORMS OF CHRISTIANITY EQUALLY GOOD?

THE spirit of intelligent inquiry and the absence of prejudice in matters of religion are two laudable features of this age. Both should be encouraged for both are good. Catholics believe they have the true religion, and as truth always gains by intelligent investigation, they should anxiously encourage inquiry into the teachings of our Church. It was in this spirit that Pope Leo the Thirteenth threw open to the scholars of the world, regardless of their belief, the treasures of the Vatican archives. The absence of prejudice is an aid in the search after truth, for the unbiassed mind has no obstacles to overcome. Catholics themselves have begun to explain in a broader spirit the phrase, "Out of the Church no salvation." I speak not now of the scientifically trained theologian. Even the people have learned to distinguish clearly between these things which are of Catholic faith, theologically certain, and of mere speculation within the degrees of probability. There is no surrender of faith and no compromise of principle, but the tendency is to the fullest toleration in matters of mere opinion. God's wish for the salvation of all is not a mere expression of complacency or a passing velleity, but a sincere desire that all should obtain the final object of life. Therefore the Almighty gives the opportunity of salvation to all.

There is a danger to be guarded against. As generous impulses are sometimes taken advantage of and turned to the injury of our nobler nature, so intellectual fairness may be made to o'erleap itself and lead to mischievous conclusions. The tendency is to what is called by some, and we must say wrongly called, Liberalism; by others, Latitudinarianism; by others still, Indifferentism. There are many among Protestants who hold that all religions are equally good. That all religions are good we are willing to admit; that all are equally good we most certainly deny. The tendency is to deny the objective certainty of truth; to maintain that a man has the same opportunity, the same facility of salvation in any of the churches. Every one notices the crashing of creeds in the Protestant denominations. Now one tenet is abandoned, now another, so that positive religion will soon cease to have any place among them. We speak not of those who believe in no form of Christianity, who are called Atheists, Agnostics, Infidels, and such like.

Nor do we refer to those strict Protestants who hold firmly to their family religion, but between these two classes there are the many who hold that religion is a matter of opinion, and that one church or one religion is as good as another. They do not say that it makes no difference whether we follow Moses, or Confucius or Christ; they do say that a general belief in Christ is enough to insure salvation equally to all believers. For want of a better name we shall call this form of belief Indifferentism. We say, this form of belief, because it is not a denial of religious faith.

Indifferentism is that form of belief which teaches that religion is not founded on objective truth, that it is only a matter of opinion, that all forms of Christianity are equally good; in a word, that one religion is as good as another. This teaching may be classed as one of the great errors of the day. It is only one step removed from unbelief; it is next door to the theory that there is not much good in any religion whatever. Catholics cannot admit this. Our position is not at variance with the teaching that conscience is the final rule of morality, that it is never lawful to act against conscience, that we are bound to follow its dictates. Nor does Catholic teaching on Indifferentism mean that we should force our faith upon the unwilling or offensively obtrude it upon those who do not wish to hear anything of it. Our position means, that, as we hold the existence of the real or objective truth of religion, we must be uncompromising in it, and where the occasion demands, we must not be silent.

Truth is one of God's moral attributes, so to speak. It is one of His qualities just as much as wisdom, goodness, providence, charity, justice or mercy. The very idea we have of the Divinity implies that He cannot be deceived nor can He deceive others. If He could He would cease to be the All-perfect God that Christians speak of. His unfailling truthfulness is the foundation of our faith; His fidelity to His promises is the corner-stone of our hope. We find one form of Christianity teaching one tenet as necessary, another teaching the contradictory. One religious body teaches the supremacy of Peter, another denies it. One church teaches the Real Presence in the Blessed Eucharist, another says that Christ is in that Holy Sacrament only virtually, or in a symbolic sense, or perhaps in a figurative way. One church teaches the necessity of the Sacraments, another denies it. One church says Baptism is necessary for salvation, another says it is not. One church teaches the Pope is infallible under certain given conditions when pronouncing upon faith or morals, another says he has no such safe-guard. One body of Christians believes in the Divinity of Christ, another section of professing Christians deny it. Two contradictories cannot be at the same time true. To say that God is indifferent as to

whether we hold a certain doctrine or reject it is equivalent to saying He is indifferent to truth. Moses received the Commandments from heaven. He had no power, and his successors had no power, to change them. As the people were bound to stand by the teaching of Moses, so also are they bound to adhere to the fuller and more complete teachings of Christ the Son of God. Reason cannot sanction contradictions. The only lawful conclusion left to us is, that all religions cannot be equally acceptable in the eye of God.

After Christ's resurrection from the dead, and before His ascension into heaven, He gave a strict and definite commission to His Apostles. We find the Saviour's own words in the gospel of St. Matthew: "Going, teach ye all 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 have commanded you. And behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" (xxviii., 19, 20). "Teach ye all nations." Teach them what? Any doctrine their oriental imaginations might suggest? No; but teach them "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded"; teach the nations to observe those things that make for the object of Christ's spiritual kingdom; teach them doctrines within the region of faith and morals. Christ said, teach them "whatsoever I have commanded you." Christ taught faith and morality. He certainly did not teach contradictions. He did not teach and he could not approve of the teaching that the Church has power to forgive sins and that she has no such power; that Christ is present in the Holy Eucharist and that He is not; that grace is necessary for salvation and that it is not; that the Virgin is really the Mother of God and that she is not. So that when one church holds one teaching and another its contradictory, plainly both cannot be equally pleasing to God. The words of that world-renowned commission meant something definite in the mind of Christ. They were intended to convey a definite and certain something to the Apostles, and they were meant to convey that certain and definite thing to the nations whom the Apostles were to teach.

Christ commanded all to believe the faith preached by the Apostles. He promised salvation only to those who believe that faith. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be condemned" (Mark xvi., 16). This must not be understood as implying that, therefore, all who do not belong to the visible body of the true Church of Christ shall be lost. People may be outside the pale of the visible communion of the Church through no fault of theirs. Like all other laws, this law of Christ, to belong to the true Church, does not reach those who are in guiltless ignorance. God is too merciful to make any other ruling.

He leaves ample room for each one to follow his conscience, that aboriginal vicar of Christ. If unity of doctrine were taught in the days of Christ, it is equally true and equally necessary to-day. In St. Matthew we read an account of Christ's commission to the Apostles to teach; in St. Mark we are told what the commissioned are to teach: "Preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark xvi., 15). Give to all men the science of salvation. Do not preach any gospel you please, but preach the Saviour's Gospel; do not give the people contradictory statements, but divine truths. In St. Matthew we read the phrase: "TEACH all nations"; in St. Mark the same idea is impressed by the words: "Preach the Gospel." The word for *teach* in Greek, the original language of the Gospel, means dogmatic teaching, and not indifferentism.

If the teaching of indifferentism were true, no one could be justly called a heretic. Yet we find Peter and Jude and John saying hard words in reference to heretics. Peter calls them "lying teachers, who shall bring in sects of perdition and deny the Lord who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction" (2, ii., 1). Jude speaks of them as "wandering stars to whom the storm of darkness is reserved forever" (i., 13). Even the gentle and affectionate John calls them Antichrists. "And as you have heard that Antichrist cometh, even now there are many Antichrists, whereby we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have remained with us" (i., 19, 20).

Let us go back to the Council of Jerusalem, held in the year 51. What the Apostles taught is as true to-day as it was when Paul thundered forth his stern, hard words against the evil-doers, or when John preached his gospel of sweetness. Many of the Jewish converts in the days preceding this first council held that the Christian Gentiles, if they wished to be saved, should submit to certain ceremonial practices. The Council of Jerusalem was called to decide the question. Paul, the fearless representative of his people, was there. Peter, as was befitting the Chief of the Apostles, presided. They knew the consequences to Christians of a decision adverse to the Jewish converts. They were fully aware of the malcontents it would make, the withdrawal of some from the Church and their opposition to pure Christianity. Yet the decision of the Apostles was that the Jewish ceremonial law did not bind and should not be imposed upon Gentile converts. Surely the Apostles could not have given a decision fraught with consequences so adverse to Christianity if it made no difference whether the Gospel of Christ were increased or diminished or changed even by a little. The action of the Apostles was decidedly foolish if one form of Christianity be as good as another, if all religions be

equal in the eye of God. The action of that Council was a model for all succeeding councils. The theory that one religion is as good as another is as false now as it was when the two deputies carried the apostolic decree condemning it from the Council of Jerusalem to the faithful at Antioch.

We turn to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians. The same error is condemned. The men against whom the Council issued its decree were spreading their errors in Galatia. St. Paul does not spare them. His scathing language is: "I wonder you are so soon removed from Him who called you into the grace of Christ unto another Gospel. Which is not another, only there are some that trouble you and would pervert the Gospel of Christ. But though we or an angel from heaven preach a gospel to you besides that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema. As we said before, so say I now again, If any one preach to you a Gospel besides that which you have received, let him be anathema" (Gal. i., 6-9). The earnestness of the Saint is well brought out by his repetition of a strong form of expression. Even one remarkable for vigorous speech would not put more forcibly the truth of the gospel preached by himself. St. Paul, who denounced the comparatively trivial error of the Galatians, would assuredly condemn the modern teaching that one religion is as good as another.

Intellectual sin is a violation of God's law as well as an ethical crime. Errors of faith are to be condemned as well as errors of morals. In his list of sins which shut one out from heaven St. Paul mentions errors in faith. He writes: "Idolatry, witchcrafts, enmities, contentions, emulations, wraths, quarrels, dissensions, sects. . . . They who do such things shall not obtain the kingdom of God" (Gal. v., 20-21.)

St. Paul teaches that there is but one faith. "Careful to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. One body and one Spirit as you are called in our hope of your calling. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in us all" (Eph. iv., 3-6). He makes this unity of faith a plea for peace. His singularly beautiful appeal to the Ephesians to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is sustained by many reasons. They form but one body, the Church. They are permeated by one Spirit, the Spirit which rules the Church. Their hope is one, to gain eternal happiness. Their Lord is one, Jesus Christ. Their baptism is one, the baptism of Christ. Their God is one, the God of all. These are some of the reasons why they should cultivate fraternal charity. In this text and with undiminished force does the Apostle urge as a reason for harmony that their faith is one. If it

were not an objective faith but only that which each one's fancy might suggest, we rather think it would not make for the unity of spirit with the force of an argument worthy of the Apostle of the Gentiles. If all forms of Christianity were equally pleasing to God how could the unity of faith be used by St. Paul as a reason and as an example of fraternal charity among the faithful? The charity of the faithful should be as their faith. The Apostle inculcates complete charity. The torrent of his words, the wealth and intensity of his illustrations show what full unity of spirit he would have. The argument is: Their faith is one. Their fraternal charity should be like it in oneness. According to the Indifferentist it matters not whether one holds the doctrines of the Greek Church or of the Episcopalian or of the Methodist or of the Catholic or of the Salvation Army. It would be strange reasoning to say to all these: As is your faith so shall be your brotherly love. The faith in such circumstances might be proposed, not as an example of unity, but as a model of dissension. And yet this beautiful unity which we claim for our faith and which the Indifferentists would destroy admits of variations within certain limits. Natural and artificial causes produce variation in the animal and vegetable world without destroying specific unity. Thus it is also in the world of thought. As in the material world all things gravitate towards a common centre and yet preserve a variety, as in the social world neither anarchy or tyranny will do, the former being destructive of unity, the latter of liberty, so in the religious world do we require unity in essentials and liberty or variety in non-essentials. In thought, in biology, in astronomy, in sociology, in all God's manifestations throughout nature there is harmony—unity amidst variety. It cannot be that only in His own fair spouse, the Church, there should be found the deformity of confusion.

In one of Christ's discourses he says: "And other sheep I have that are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice, and there shall be one fold and one shepherd" (John x., 16). A teaching so varied and so contradictory as is that of Indifferentism cannot be reconciled with the idea of unity conveyed by these words of our Lord.

Take the evidence of a few of the early Fathers. St. Ignatius, the Martyr, who lived in the Apostolic age is fierce in his denunciation of heretics and schismatics. The former he calls "wild beasts in human form." The latter, he says, "do not inherit the kingdom of God." Of course, the Saint does not mean to denounce the honest man who follows his conscience and yet happens to be outside the visible communion of the Church. The historian, Eusebius, tells us that Polycarp used to say of heresies: "Good

God! upon what times hast Thou permitted me to fall, that I should hear such things." St. Justin compares heretical teachers to false prophets among the Jews and calls them false Christians and false Apostles. We shall give three more Patristic authorities whom Indifferentists cannot refuse to honor. They are St. Cyprian, St. Augustine and St. Fulgentius. These are admittedly faithful representatives of the early Church, the Church of the Fathers. St. Cyprian does away with the equality of all forms of Christianity in this manner: "If it were possible for any one to escape that was not in the ark of Noah, it shall likewise be possible for him to escape who is not in the true Church." "Neither baptism," writes St. Fulgentius, "nor liberal alms nor death itself for the profession of Christ, can avail a man anything in order to salvation if he does not hold the unity of the Catholic Church." St. Augustine wrote to Donatus in a spirit of the fullest frankness. Donatus was a Christian bishop whose only error was that he separated himself from the communion of the faithful. All other points of doctrine he held in common with St. Augustine. Yet the Bishop of Hippo applied to him this strong language: "Being out of the pale of the Church, separated from its unity and bond of charity, thou wouldst not escape damnation though thou shouldst be burnt alive for confessing the name of Christ." Such language of the Fathers were meaningless if all forms of Christianity were equally good before God.

The doctrine that it matters not to what form of Christianity a man adheres is a denial of dogmatic teaching. It is bringing faith down to a mere emotion, whereas faith is eminently intellectual. And let it be clearly understood what we mean by dogma. It is a truth contained in God's Word, whether written in the Scripture or unwritten as the oral teaching of the Apostles preserved in the Church and proposed by the Church for the belief of the faithful. The Apostles condemned heresies and Christ taught many dogmas. Belief in the Divinity of Christ is itself a dogma. The fact is, a non-dogmatic Christian is a contradiction in terms. Nor can we have supernatural virtues without dogmatic teaching. A supernatural virtue arises from grace and faith. These are of its very essence. Faith is an act of the intellect and implies a belief in the dogma that there is a God whose truth we may rely upon. There may be mere natural virtues without theological dogma in the strict sense. Doubtless, many unbelievers do some naturally good works, works having no direct relation with the next life and deserving no reward in it, but meriting natural rewards on this side of the grave. Every branch of science has its dogmatic teaching. The axioms of geometry are dogmas. People accept them without proof. Some things are so clear that they do not admit of proof.

Physical science, astronomy, political economy, all have their dogmas. Why deny dogmatic teaching to the highest of all sciences, theology? Those who receive Christian truth as Divine must take it as lasting for all time.

It may seem a strange statement that Catholic dogmas are easy and within the reach of all. In what sense are they easy? Not in the sense that we can comprehend the Trinity or get a full grasp of God, or sound all the depths of the Resurrection. Not in the sense that all dogmas are in themselves clear. Some of them are hard and dark to the man who is not trained in scientific theology, as difficult to the ordinary Catholic as are some medical formulas or legal phrases to the every-day citizen. But the Church does not demand interior assent to dogmatic statements on the part of those who cannot comprehend them. All can understand the dogma of the Church's infallibility. Real assent to this dogma is not difficult. Catholics know Christ's promise to His Church. On this phase of the question, Cardinal Newman writes: "But it is not the necessary result of unity of profession, nor is it the fact, that the Church imposes dogmatic statements on the interior assent of those who cannot comprehend them. The difficulty is removed by the dogma of the Church's infallibility, and of the consequent duty of 'implicit faith' in her word. The 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church' is an article of the Creed and an article which, inclusive of her infallibility, all men, high and low, can easily master and accept with a real and operative assent. It stands in the place of all abstruse propositions in a Catholic's mind, for to believe in her word is virtually to believe in them all. Even what he cannot understand, at least he can believe to be true; and he believes it to be true because he believes in the Church." (*Grammar of Assent*, p. 144.)

Belief in the equality of all forms of Christianity, is a denial of absolute truth. Universal skepticism refutes itself, so it need not be taken into consideration. Among philosophers, there is a useful distinction of certainty into natural and philosophical. The former is direct, implies no reflective process, and takes place before the mind determines the motive of assent. The latter takes place only after the motive of assent has been clearly determined. Natural certainty is eminently trustworthy, and is the basis of philosophical certainty. The faculty which knows and the objects known, are the two sources, from which knowledge results. The ear hears, but not beyond the range of its hearing; the eye sees, but not beyond the range of its vision; the mind knows or perceives objects, but only within its mental reach. It speaks with authority of those things within its proper sphere; it knows nothing of those outside. Hence, all knowledge is pri-



marily objective. Objective evidence determines the natural certainty of this knowledge called, by philosophers, sense-knowledge. The certainty of purely intellectual truths is determined by the same motive. Hence, truth is a real something, having its existence outside the apprehension of the individual, and any teaching which involves the denial of objective truth, must be false. The intellect is a divine element in man. The light of reason is an illumination from God Himself. The intellect has its proper object, and that object is truth. Whatever is, is truth. The mind is capable of knowing what is. Doubt is full of despair. The most reckless skeptics never went so far as to reduce their theories to practice. Their knowledge is limited; yet, if we take the accumulated information of all the ages, it amounts to a great deal. It gives us a keener insight into the teaching of St. Thomas, that "Every bodily creature, however immense, must be inferior to man, by reason of his intellect." Geology tells us of the formation of the earth; natural philosophy, of nature's laws; chemistry, of the constituent parts of bodies; astronomy, of the stars; philology leads us back to the common root of man's mother tongue; history gives up the dead past; physiology puts before our wondering eyes the formative process of organisms. We find objective truth in all these sciences, and we find it with a certainty. It were strange if religion, the "science of salvation," were the only one in which no objective truth could surely be found. Disbelief in the possibility of attaining to any objective truth should be left to the old sophists. Accepting objective truth, and looking upon religion as a body of truths, we take it to be a reality. Pascal says it is so stupendous a reality, that those who will not take the trouble to study its obscurities, are justly deprived of its benefits. It will not do to say that indifferentism is a sign of higher culture. The truth seems to be much otherwise. "A crude and uncultured mind," says St. Cyril of Alexandria, "glories in unbelief, and rejects, as false, all that it cannot understand; thus grossest ignorance goes hand in hand with boundless self-conceit."

Bacon expresses the same idea in the following elaborate way: "It is an assured truth, and a conclusion of experience, that a little or superficial knowledge of philosophy may incline the mind of man to atheism; but a further proceeding therein doth bring the mind back again to religion, for in the entrance of philosophy, when the second causes, which are new unto the senses, do offer themselves to the mind, if it dwell and stay there it may induce some oblivion to the highest cause, but when a man passeth on further and seeth the dependence of causes and the works of Providence, then, according to the allegory of the poet, he will easily believe that the

highest link of nature's chain must needs be tied to the foot of Jupiter's chair."<sup>1</sup>

Tried at the bar of common sense this modern form of Protestantism will not stand the test. Whilst we respect a man's conscientious belief, we do not hold in equal reverence what we believe to be true with what we know to be false. Professor Huxley, for example, does not show the same courtesy towards the political creed of Mr. Gladstone as he does towards his own. Nor would that distinguished scientist, John Tyndall, whose own exertions raised him from his humble home by the banks of the Barrow to the highest position in scientific London, admit to equal respect a fact of science which he knows to be true, with a scientific hypothesis which to him was doubtful, if not downright false. He would positively poke fun at the bare idea. The phrase of the Indifferentist, "I respect all religions alike," goes down before the instincts of humanity. Scripture, history, the Fathers, philosophy, and common sense, condemn Indifferentism; its only support is a false notion of romantic sentimentalism.

The most rational of all religions is that of the Church of which Christ said: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Math. xvi., 18).

The radical unsoundness of the modern non-Catholic forms of Christianity was brought in when three hundred years ago our Protestant brethren cut off the entail of their Catholic inheritance. The priests who ministered at the altar before the Reformation explained many of the doctrines of the Church very differently from the explanations given in modern Protestant pulpits. That Protestantism is fast running its course is clear from the breaking up of its creeds. In the revision of their formulas of faith they reject one article to-day, another to-morrow. If one or two or three, why not all? The principle of unity is lost, the foundation is destroyed, the whole edifice must fall. This in itself should not delight Catholics, because it is all the worse for humanity to have the last vestige of Christianity disappear from Protestantism. It emphasizes an obligation upon Catholics. It is a good opportunity to make known the truth. Newspapers and periodicals and pamphlets and books might be respectfully given to non-Catholics. Catholic laymen should equip themselves well by a course of solid reading on Catholic subjects so as to be able to give correct and clear explanations to their non-Catholic fellow-citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> *Advancement in Learning*, i., 3.