

THE TEACHING OF JESUS.

CHAPTER 8.

The next six chapters began with a Quaker discussion group, which I was asked to chair. They are not a resume of the discussions; they are a resume of the homework I did before each discussion took place. If the discussion went well, I was content to draw out the opinions of others, and said little about my own views. If the discussion began to falter, I had a fund of thoughts with which to help things along. The choice of subject was somewhat haphazard; as one evening ended, the subject for the next meeting was chosen.

So these are individual essays, written up after the discussions were all over, at a time when the atrocity of the 11th September was very much in mind. I have altered them little. They are essays on science and religion, and religion and war. Not all Quakers are Christians, and half are pacifists. If I was to chair the discussions, I had to accommodate such views as much as I possibly could. So many of the opinions expressed in these essays were never voiced in the discussions; they were the homework I did beforehand, to help the discussion along if need be. If the discussion was going well, politeness and tact demanded I did not voice opinions which some of those present might have found provocative. Maybe traditional Christian pieties were less respected than usual. But they were happy evenings.

The essays on the thought of Jesus were written afterwards, but very much as a sequel to the discussions. I would not have written them, had the discussions not taken place.

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If Thomas a Kempis said one thing profoundly true, it was that a few sentences of Jesus were worth all the writings of the Saints put together. Yet much of the Sermon on the Mount, if taken literally as it was pretty clearly intended to be taken, is completely

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irresponsible in the changed social conditions today. Christ's experience, and therefore his knowledge, was very limited. Human nature may not change; but the social conditions are as dramatically different as can be imagined from what they were in his day. What Jesus said about the relationship of God to man may be timeless; but it would be surprising if he gave much useful advice on how to cope with the problems of everyday life.

In War every great commander knows that every campaign and every battle is unlike any other, and demands of him a completely fresh appraisal of the situation as he sees it, and all the facts bearing on it, not least the ability of himself and his men to accomplish what he has in mind. His outstanding intellect must understand profoundly what is to take place. He must be confident in his own judgement, and never follow slavishly the plans of successful commanders in the past, however attractive. To do so, and force them to fit new situations, is the road to catastrophe.

I know that this is equally true of the civilian world. Every significant legal case demands the same kind of appraisal; and the way to present it must be thought out afresh. Nowhere in the Gospels do you find this secular wisdom. I do not believe Jesus was attempting to give serious guidance about conduct in the secular world; the parable of the unjust steward is trivial in comparison. If he was, then I have no hesitation in preferring my own lifetime's experience to anything Jesus may have said. He preached the good-news of the kingdom of heaven. And the question everyone must ask himself, who takes Jesus seriously, is whether the Christian life is an attempt to get into heaven, or is it an attempt to live life properly in this world, which must include getting involved in the secular world? The medieval mystic, John Ruesbroke, wrote that the perfect life was not the contemplative life; the perfect life was when a man had perfected his contemplation, and then gone out to live an ordinary life in the community. Was he right? Or does the Christian seek a perfection that keeps him unstained by the secular world?

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The question is absolutely crucial, although there may be no clear cut answer. My answer is to remember that Christ only had a sense of indwelling with God, whom he called Father, to inspire him. He called his disciples friends, but they all misunderstood him. He had no-one in whom he could confide; no-one of whom he could ask advice. Whereas his sense of a communion with God must have been almost overwhelming. Otherwise he was entirely alone. It is absolutely obvious that he was telling us about the nature of God, as he knew it. He had no interest in the wealth creation of society.

As regards the secular world, his experience was very limited. As a boy he went to Egypt, as a man to Tyre; he had seen little of the world. He can have had no concept of the Empire, nor of the Roman Army, nor of the organisation necessary to sustain both. Nor can he have pondered the question why Rome was able to bring peace, when Greece for all her genius had failed. His deep study was of the scriptures: not secular history. His worldly knowledge must have been entirely parochial. Indeed without Paul's cosmopolitan reinterpretation, Christianity would have lived and died an obscure Jewish sect. It needed Paul to convert it into a world religion. Jesus had no experience even of running a community, or wealth creation beyond the carpenter's shop. If it is said he had the experience of his disciples for three years, they lived on the charity of rich women. Many of us would say that was not a creditable way to live. Where his teaching soared above his contemporaries was in his knowledge and understanding of the scriptures, in the authority with which he spoke, and in the freshness of his message; although one must remember that much of the Sermon on the Mount was current thought at the time. Only a fool lectures on subjects he does not understand, and Jesus was anything but a fool. It is absolutely obvious he taught men about the thing he knew supremely well: the nature of God, and man's proper relationship with him.

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The inevitable result was that his Kingdom was other worldly. Maybe the might of Imperial Rome dictated that anyway. But his sense of communion with God and the absence of any comparable human intimacy made it inevitable, unless he were to indulge in the wildest and most foolish egotism. He did what he could with the means available to him. And what he achieved, from any point of view, was truly remarkable. But he did not have the benefit of an indwelling with a member of mankind as well; that would have meant that his gospel would have embraced that other person. It would have embraced this world, as well as the next. And it may be that to those who have an indwelling with God and an indwelling with man, greater things are achievable, as Jesus himself predicted. But that is to stand on the shoulders of giants, as Isaac Newton said. It might even have disabled Jesus from being the Messiah. His kingdom would probably have resembled Augustine's City of God: living beside the City of Rome, nourishing it, sustaining it, even rebuking it; but not challenging it. Jesus only had God, so his kingdom had to be other worldly.

No doubt he was very intelligent. He knew the scriptures, and he had the supreme conviction that he had a communion with God, in which he was probably right, and the belief that he was the Messiah. That will have enabled him to bring a fresh intelligence to bear on the scriptures; and with Divine inspiration, and a complete absence of egotism, he will have been able to work out correctly the salient features of the Messianic mission. Otherwise he was like us, in body and mind. He had no magical powers.

The views Jesus held on astronomy were extremely crude: the stars were going to fall in the day of judgement. But that does not alter the fact that Newton's theory of gravitation was a better hypothesis than that of Ptolemy for describing the heavens. Nor does it alter the fact that Einstein's field theory of gravitation is a better hypothesis than Newton's force theory. Almost everyone recognises that it would be pathetic to dispute the considered judgements of science, and to prefer the crude views of Jesus on astronomy, because science

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is recognised as truthful; (although I have been surprised and dismayed to be told that the amount of deliberate dishonesty in scientific research nowadays is alarming). Indeed science is, or ought to be, the accurate and truthful measurement of Nature. Whereas in religion, intolerance of dissenting opinion has generally been the norm from Paul's Epistles onwards. And from the Council of Nicea onwards, persecution! The unpleasant truth is that there has been no systematic pursuit of truth in religion, as there has in science. A pursuit of orthodoxy maybe; but that is the path of fashionable error. Nowadays if religion invited us to prefer the opinions of Jesus to those of Ptolemy, Newton and Einstein, most intelligent people would think religion absurd. Yet in the 19th century, evolution, the second great scientific thought, was opposed with passionate and diabolical fury. It was a repetition of the opposition to Galileo.

Galileo discovered with his telescope that the planet Jupiter had moons; but the Jesuits of the Inquisition refused to look down his telescope to see if there were any moons. They knew better; they knew there were only seven planets, because they knew seven was the perfect number; so there could not be any moons, as that would add to the number seven. And Galileo was prosecuted for heresy; and told bluntly to tell the "Truth" or face torture. They meant, admit that Copernicus was wrong, and that their Biblical version of astronomy was correct, or face torture. Today anyone can see they were ignorant bigots, though I think devilish perverters of the truth might be nearer the mark; but it cannot have been so obvious at the time, because their like are still around today in all walks of life. Nor was it obvious to the 19th century clerics who refused to accept so vehemently the proof of evolution (in terms of fossil remains) and its consequences. But the consequence of disputing one profound truth of science after another and losing, is that you yourself lose respect. Science needs inspiration as well as inductive reasoning; inspiration has only one source; and maybe science is God's gift to man, as Jesus was. Indeed God may have inspired scientific discovery as the way to

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overcome the dishonesty, corruption and intolerance of the Church, which faced Him and obstructed his plans at the end of the Middle Ages. So He had to get rid of the obstruction: just as He had to get rid of the dinosaurs! When the experience of Erasmus and Luther showed that it was impossible to reform the Church from within, and that the only reform was by schism, God may have decided that He would outmanoeuvre all the Churches, and through the agency of science show how limited was the idea of Salvation, which all Churches held. Science may be God's gift to man, as Jesus was.

Yet science remains the chief stumbling block to accepting the teaching of Jesus. He knew nothing of science; though science has not only swept away the foundations of Plato's philosophy, it has swept away the foundations of the Church's theology, which since Augustine has been based on Plato. Sixty years ago Bertrand Russell was saying that Plato's philosophy was based on fundamental ideas about space, time and matter, which modern atomic physics had shown were fundamentally flawed. As Bertrand Russell was a good deal more sympathetic to Plato than he was to Aristotle, I am prepared to accept he knew what he was talking about. Certainly science has disposed of Plato's belief that you can construct a world of ideal forms and certain truth on a basis of logic alone. You need to experiment, with X-ray diffraction patterns, to discover the form crystal structure takes. Logic gets you nowhere. We realize now that the conclusions to which reasoning leads are only as valid as the assumptions on which that reasoning is based. Reasoning depends on its parameters, just as mathematics depends on its axioms, and science depends on its basic assumptions.

Science has proved to a high degree of probability that in a period of countless ages matter or star-dust has evolved into us. The idea of evolution is as dramatic a change in our thinking as that which followed the publication of Newton's Principia, which showed that the Universe when viewed on a grand scale is ordered. Evolution is linked with the name of Darwin; but the idea was current long before Darwin, only he brought an overwhelming mass

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of evidence to support it. As regards evolution, it does not matter whether the mechanism of evolution is natural selection or survival of the fittest, nor even if it consists of 1001 acts of creation along the way; it is still evolution! The fact is star-dust evolved into us.

Indeed to go a stage further, the construction of a theory of consciousness, which is the subject matter of my book, means that the logical working out of a particular frame of mind is only as valid as the assumptions on which that particular frame of mind is based. A professional lawyer's assumptions are valid in interpreting an Act of Parliament; but not in philosophy. Thomas Aquinas did not offer us immortal truths; he worked out with penetrating logic one medieval frame of mind: that is all. Logic is a tool: not a god; and logic by itself can never lead us unaided to immortal truth. Science is more modest than religion, and much more reliable: it claims to deal only in probabilities. So with the disappearance of ideal certainties, all certain creeds disappear, and they become merely working hypotheses or the rules of a club: which is very much the view taken by the man in the street. Otherwise, if it is claimed creeds are written in stone, they fly in the face of evolution, which is today's experience; and no-one must complain if intelligent people say they are false.

The consequences of Evolution are very far reaching. Arcadia and the Garden of Eden are myths. At some stage Man, in the sense of a living soul aware of itself, appeared or was created from the stock of his forefathers. There was no Fall, save insofar as we each have our own fall. Christ was not a Second Adam, to put right what had gone wrong historically. Nothing had gone wrong: in detail yes, many small things had gone wrong: no animal likes being eaten by a predator. But in broad outline, Man's evolution into a conscious soul was a triumphant success. All that was necessary was that man should be taught about God, correctly; and having been taught about God, he needed to seek the same kind of relationship with his fellow man too. He would then be honouring one set of standards: not two.

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The almost certain proof of evolution changes the future as well as the past. Evolution teaches that everything in experience changes, rather like the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: even an indwelling with God changes. The future of this world becomes potential, which we can influence either for good or ill; it ceases consciously to be a preparatory school for a life of happiness after death. To be effective in this world, you have to dedicate yourself to what you are doing, and forget about the hereafter. If your eyes are fixed on the hereafter, you are ineffective here and now. At least that is my experience. It is the old choice between doing and being. Do you want to do something effective; or occupy a position, and be admired by yourself and others? You cannot generally have both at the same time. Evolution prevents you turning the social and political clock back for long.

This is a chapter to which the Church of England has little to contribute. The clergy have not embraced evolution, their creeds are still the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow; and their theology is of a personal salvation in a world after death: see particularly the Easter collect in the new Common Worship. In the medieval world there was a Welsh text called "The Food of the Soul", which suggested there was only one type of virtuous love: the love of God and of Mankind was different only in degree. Only one set of standards, not two. But Mr. Oliver Davies, whose article I read about the text, suggests that this idea must have come from the pagan tradition of bardic inspiration, not from the Bible. Surely he was right; the laity was forbidden to read the Bible in those days. As for the promise of a heaven after death, that seems to be attractive nowadays to men who feel there is nothing they can usefully do about their condition in this world; it is viewed by the affluent man in the street with the same scepticism with which indulgences were viewed in the sixteenth century. Besides folk-law nowadays is that everyone goes to heaven; and however unlikely, any clergyman who preached hell-fire would be greeted with derision. Even the teaching of Jesus that he was the good shepherd, although it illuminates the beauty and sublimity of the teacher, seems to have

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little relevance in the world today. That a perfect shepherd and his tiny flock are making their way to a heaven after death, is a poor guide to those struggling to ensure that National Socialism or its equivalent will not lead us again into world war, and its fearful slaughter.

So if heaven has lost its appeal, and science is God's answer to ecclesiastical corruption, what is left of the teaching of Jesus? The problem facing Christians is how to retain Jesus as Messiah or Redeemer, and yet strip from him the bogus magic with which he is surrounded: indeed to discover whether it is possible to do this, or whether stripping him of the magic destroys the great myth he left behind as well? In religious terms, if Jesus led us to the Father, has he fulfilled his mission; is not an indwelling with the Father sufficient for us to cope with life as it ought to be lived?

We are not so limited as Jesus in our experience of life. So we can bring a much broader intelligence to bear on life's problems. And after all, we have to face much broader problems. Those who seek to build an entire theory of social responsibility on the authority of one remark, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's..." are little better than those who seek to find the whole of modern science in the Koran. If you set out on such a quest, you are unwise; if you think you have succeeded in your quest, you have lost all judgement. We may have lost the ability to heal the sick as he did; but we are much better informed about almost every aspect of life than Jesus was; and it is no blasphemy to say it. It is no more irreverent than saying that the modern student of Part I of the Natural Science Tripos knows more physics than Newton. Both statements are correct; and it does not derogate from Newton's genius. But we do not, of course, have to be the Messiah; and if we did, I think we would not show up very well. He did; and was incomparable.

If a man wants to follow Jesus, which was the heart of his teaching, as opposed simply to admiring him, then what is important is that Christ was a man like us, even if God put something of His very Self into him. His physical body worked in the same way; if he cut

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his finger on a chisel, the chemistry of his blood clotting was the same as ours. His mind worked in the same way; he too had beliefs and had to decide whether to put them into practice. His affections were the same as ours; he too could form friendships, and find he loved someone. And if he had a closer walk with God and a clearer understanding of His will than most of us, there is nothing obvious to prevent us enjoying the same advantages. The final prayer, with which the Last Discourses end, envisages the Creator dwelling in men, as he had dwelt in Jesus himself. So provided there is no impassable gulf between Jesus and ourselves, what was possible for him should be possible for us. But if there is a gulf, and we cannot imitate him, the position is much more delicate. Does an indwelling with the Almighty leave Jesus behind? Or is one a coward; does one abdicate having a mind of one's own, because one dare not face the consequences?

What does it mean to say, "Jesus is incomparable"? What does it mean to follow Jesus in a profession in this scientific, commercial world, where you must either master the Rules of Conflict or perish. Even if you do master them, it is wise to remember that peace is better than conflict; though it may not be always attainable. It is little good going to the Gospels to find an answer. Whether Biblical criticism is valid or invalid, it has undermined the credibility of the Gospels as biography or history in the modern sense. They were written, and avowedly written, to prove Jesus was the Messiah, and had fulfilled the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. Maybe he did; but this is of little interest to us. Even Pauline thought, with its emphasis on the Jewish idea of sacrifice for sin, is barely intelligible to the scientific mind.

Nor is it much good going to the clergy, who are partial witnesses. Nowadays we still tend to accept impartial statements until they are shown to be wrong, though we may be more and more sceptical about statements really being impartial. But no-one believes statements by a partial witness. Today we bracket the partial witness with John Tetzl, the 16th century

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Dominican friar, who sold indulgences by claiming that if you helped to pay for the new St. Peter's, not only would you go straight to heaven, but the local hills would turn to solid silver. Most politicians are partial witnesses; and many people regard them as 16th century educated Bavarians regarded John Tetzel. In contrast, when Horace, Cicero, Seneca and Ptolemy say that the star Sirius was red, we see no reason, no collective reason, for them to misrepresent its colour. Indeed Bishop Gregory of Tours in AD 560 confirmed it. And when the Arab astronomer Al Sufi in AD 900 says it was white, as it is today, it seems incredible. But one must look for a natural explanation for a star to change its colour in 400 years, when it normally takes tens of millions of years. One possibility is that Sirius had a giant red twin which masked it, and collapsed; but this must be very tentative. Nowadays we look for explanations which are within the world of Nature, however incredible they may seem; and we decline to take too much on trust of word of mouth. The world of science may not be as honest as it used to be; but it still commands a fair measure of respect. The world of religious faith does not.

Yet Christ's crucifixion and resurrection can be subjected to a similar scrutiny. To go to your cross alone, rejected and despised demands, I am sure, a greater courage than to die in battle. Whatever enabled him to do it, was the most incredible miracle. So incredible, that none of his disciples even contemplated following him. On Good Friday they were a pack of cringing cowards. Yet within a few weeks, another miracle happened; they became incomparably brave men who thought nothing of bringing the same fate on themselves. They say it was the resurrection that made the difference; no-one has been able to suggest anything else. The authorities accused them of stealing the body. Everyone knew it was rubbish. As though a body-snatcher could become a consummate hero! Only frightened men would suggest it.

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The resurrection for them may not have been the same as our idea of the resurrection, because we are influenced by art and legend and myth, and time. But it is difficult not to be persuaded that they were supremely confident about it; whence otherwise did they obtain their courage? And this is the way to follow Jesus today; by being prepared to imitate his consummate courage in the dramatically changed social conditions of today, if circumstances arise which invite you or challenge you to do so. You do not study with modern scholarship the minutiae of what he said. You go to the heart of the matter, which was to follow him; the fringe benefits need not detain you. The difficulty is to recognise a challenge, from a temptation to be absurd. You want to follow Christ; and not Don Quixote.

“Belief in God in an age of science” has many disciples, not least among scientists; but the divinity and teaching of Jesus are another matter entirely. Belief in God can be prompted by an interpretation of the incredible coincidences in the natural world which scientific research has revealed. Belief in Jesus can be prompted by courage, honour, truthfulness, the old Roman virtues. These are all the better if crowned by the Christian virtues of forgiveness and charity. But the Christian virtues without the Roman tend to be servile and obsequious. There are no short cuts; Christ taught men to suffer and die for something it was worthwhile to die for. One wants to make sure that if one sacrifices one’s life, the cause one has chosen is worth it; but his teaching was incomparable. It is no flattery to call him the Messiah.