



The Problem of Christianity

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THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIANITY.

I HAVE been asked to give a criticism of the first volume of Professor Royce's *The Problem of Christianity* from the systematic point of view. I am not quite sure what this cryptic phrase means, but I suppose that what I am really asked to do is to inquire how far the conception of Christianity which Professor Royce gives us in his expository volume is adequate from the point of view of the modern theologian: whether it includes all that he would wish to put in his own definition of Christianity, and whether it combines the elements it includes in proper proportion.

Before undertaking this task I should like to make three preliminary remarks:

1. I wish to express the satisfaction which we all feel in welcoming Professor Royce to this circle for the purpose of such a discussion. Professor Royce speaks modestly of his own attainments as a theologian, but the book in question gives evidence of such long-continued and sympathetic thought on the central problems of theology that we feel that its author can be nowhere more at home than in just such a circle as this.

2. I should like to raise the question whether Professor Royce has quite accurately defined the point of view from which he approaches his subject when he contrasts his own position, on the one hand, with that of all Christian theologians, whether liberal or conservative; and on the other hand, with those students of the subject whose attitude is one of pure indifference. A man who wins from his study of Christianity—a study conducted with the philosophic detachment which characterizes the present book—the conviction that in Christianity we have thus far at least “man's most impressive vision of salvation and his principal glimpse of the home land of the spirit,”—a man who believes that the central ideas of the Christian religion answer the deepest needs of humanity and record its highest attainments to such an extent that whatever expression they may receive in the future

“will be attended with the knowledge that in its historical origins the religion of the future will be continuous with and dependent upon the earliest Christianity, so that the whole growth and vitality of the religion of the future will depend upon its harmony with the Christian spirit,”—such a man has surely passed the dividing line which separates the Christian from his critics and won the right to a place in the company of Christian theologians.

3. I wish to express my satisfaction at the clear insight expressed by our author in the very phrasing of his question, that what we most need to-day is a philosophy of history, a philosophy which shall interpret the individual experiences through which the race from time to time has passed, and the typical convictions to which it has given expression in the light of “the lesson that the religious history of the race, viewed if possible as a connected whole, has taught man.” Whether we can succeed in such an interpretation may be arguable, but of this we may be sure, that if we lose faith in the possibility of such an interpretation, we shall empty life of its highest meaning and leave to philosophy only that cataloguing and re-cataloguing of logical concepts in forms admitting of equal application in every possible world to which Bertrand Russell has in his most recent utterance tried to confine it.

With so much by way of preface let me proceed at once to the task assigned me. I shall consider in order, first, what Professor Royce attempts to do; secondly, the method which he follows, and thirdly, the conclusion to which he comes.

1. And first then of what Professor Royce attempts to do. He defines his task himself on page 20 of Volume I as a double one. It is in part one of definition; in part one of valuation. “Our problem,” he writes, “involves some attempt to find out what this great religion most essentially is and means, what its most permanent and indispensable features are. Secondly, our problem is the problem of estimating these most permanent and indispensable features of Christianity in the light of what we can learn of the lesson that the religious history of the race, viewed if possible as a connected whole, has taught man.” What does

it mean to be a Christian, understanding by Christianity what Christians themselves have believed it to be? That is the first problem, the problem of definition. And the second grows naturally out of it. What is the significance of this Christian faith? Does it approve itself to us to-day as tenable? Can the modern man "consistently be in creed a Christian"? This is the problem of valuation.

So stated it would seem on the face of it that we were dealing with two quite different questions. But as a matter of fact, as Professor Royce well sees, they cannot be separated. How am I going to tell what belongs to Christianity? What is its essence as distinct from its transient and passing features? Clearly only through some process of value judgment by which I discriminate between the materials which history presents to me as more or less significant and enduring. Not all that Christians have regarded as Christian belongs to Christianity, but only that part of the Christian beliefs and experiences which maintain their authority in spite of the changes of the changing years. What the permanent core of vital truth may be, each must judge for himself, and his judgment may differ from his predecessors,—will in fact differ to a greater or less degree. In his book Professor Royce makes his contribution to this trans-valuation of values, and he justifies himself in so doing because the modern man, of whom he is the spokesman, is not simply a newcomer on the stage of history, but one who sums up in himself all the previous course of development, one therefore who looks upon Christianity not as an outsider, but as one to the manor born.

It is clear that in the very definition of his enterprise our author commits himself to a definite philosophical position, an attitude toward life and especially history, which finds in universals a significance which a merely nominalistic and sceptical metaphysics denies. For Royce this is a rational universe, and history, as Lessing taught, the education of the human race. He believes that humanity, taken as a whole "has some genuine and significant spiritual unity so that its life is no mere flow and strife of opinions, but includes a growth in genuine insight"

(p. 19). I for one believe that in this Professor Royce is profoundly right, and what I shall be obliged to say by way of criticism of his treatment concerns not what he tries to do, but the way he does it.

2. My first difficulty concerns Professor Royce's method. What he proposed, as we have seen, is a definition of the essence of Christianity, the separation from the vast mass of material that our records give us, of the permanent and significant core. How does he go about this separation?

He does not tell us. That is our first embarrassment. Certain negative principles, to be sure, he follows, such for example as the rejection of the dogmatic method which bids us look for our definition of Christianity to the official records and decisions of the church. Nor is he any better satisfied with that modern substitute for the dogmatic method which would identify Christianity with the teaching of its founder as distinct from the later additions which have been made to that teaching by his disciples. In contrast to this he maintains that it was not Jesus alone, but the church which was the founder of Christianity, and that the beliefs about Jesus, which we find in the writings of his disciples, and notably of men like Paul and John, belong of right among our sources and should determine our understanding of what Christianity is.

In all this, it need not be said, the present writer heartily agrees with him. No attempt to understand Christianity which ignores the experience of Christians about Christ can be historically justified. The actual living religion that has made its triumphant march through the centuries is the religion of the living and risen Christ.

My difficulty with Professor Royce begins with his account of what Christianity means to the church. He picks out three ideas as of fundamental importance for the Christian religion: the idea of the church, or the beloved community; the idea of sin, or the moral burden of the individual; the idea of atonement, or the saving deed through which this moral burden is lifted off. In these three he believes that the genius of Christianity may be expressed and its permanent contribution to humanity defined.

I believe with all my heart that the three ideas named are of fundamental importance for the Christian religion, and I think we who are theologians *ex professo* owe to Professor Royce a debt of gratitude in having reëstablished them in the place of central importance from which some contemporary theologians have been tempted to dethrone them. But it is not easy to see why these three should have been singled out to the exclusion of others (*e. g.*, the incarnation and the deity of Christ), which hold quite as prominent a place in the New Testament, and have maintained their place through the later centuries among the most cherished and sacred convictions of Christians. Why should one be taken and the other left? Surely only because when tested by the modern man's standard of value they have been tried and found wanting. But this testing Professor Royce nowhere undertakes. They are condemned without a trial. The case against them goes by default.

3. And this leads me to consider, in the next place, Professor Royce's positive interpretation of the Christian religion. That religion, as he tells us, is in its essence a religion of loyalty. It is loyalty to the beloved community which is itself the community of the loyal. This community deserves allegiance and justifies our hope in its final supremacy, not simply because it is the company of the morally perfect, but because through its principle of loyalty it makes atonement possible. It is the community that has come into existence through a deed of salvation so original, so satisfying, so perfectly adapted to the social situation as to make the impossible possible, the unpardonable sin pardonable, and reconcile the traitor himself to his own shame as the occasion of so notable and admirable an achievement.

In all this there is much that is admirable upon which one would like to dwell. In his emphasis upon the place held by the church as the company of the loyal; in his redefinition of love in terms of loyalty; in his psychological account of the genesis of sin as due to the inherent contrast between the principle of self assertion and the claims of the social standard; in his interpretation of atonement as the supreme expression of the work of the creative artist love—in all this Professor Royce has not only

given utterance to vital truths with prophetic insight, but has, I believe, recovered aspects of the Christian experience which for the time being have fallen too much into forgetfulness. This is especially true of his treatment of original sin and of the atonement.

But the purpose of this paper, I take it, is not so much to record points of agreement—many and important as these are, or to compliment Professor Royce on the many felicitous phrases with which he has illuminated the various phases of his subjects, as to point out those aspects of his treatment which raise questions in the mind of his reviewer, in the hope that these doubts may be resolved in the discussion that follows.

And the first thing which I miss in Professor Royce's treatment of Christianity as a religion of loyalty is any adequate definition of the object which calls forth loyalty. That there must be such an object he clearly sees. That the early Christians believed that they had found it he repeatedly asserts, but in the transfer of essential Christianity from its ancient to its modern domicile one cannot help having the suspicion that in some mysterious way this important part of the Christian's household furnishings has been dropped by the way.

There are three different answers which we may give to the question, To what does the Christian owe allegiance? We may say, he owes it to Jesus Christ, the founder of the Christian community; or we may say he owes it to the church which Christ founded; or still again, to the unseen God who reveals himself in and through both as the ultimate object of loyalty. In a very real sense all three of these entered into the experience of the primitive Christians. Professor Royce makes place only for the second, or at least so fuses it with the first and the third that they cannot be distinguished from it.

In this he claims to be following the early Christian example, which identifies the spirit of Christ with the spirit of the community, and both with the spirit of God. There are, he reminds us, two distinct meanings which the word, Christ, has to the Christian. In the first place, it stands for the historic Jesus, the human individual who lived and taught and died in Palestine,

the giver of the parables, the teacher of brotherhood, the master and friend whose story the gospels record. But in the second place, it stands for the divine being who became incarnate in Jesus and who lives on as the inspiring spirit of the community he founded. Professor Royce is quite right in emphasizing the fundamental importance of the second of these aspects of the Christian belief and insisting that no definition of Christianity can be adequate which leaves it out. But the first seems to interest him little. Whether Jesus was what he claimed to be; whether there was any human individual deserving the confidence which his disciples put in him; whether the author of the Fourth Gospel was or was not right in his conviction not simply that the Word was made flesh, but that the Word was made flesh in Jesus, seems to Royce of small importance. It is not Jesus, after all, who was the founder of Christianity, but the church which saw in Jesus that Christ who was at the same time the immanent law of its own higher life. It is not Jesus then to whom the Christian is loyal, but the church, or what comes to the same thing, the spirit who is at the same time the spirit of Jesus and the spirit of the church.

But this is only to push the question one step further back. What is this church to which the Christian is to be loyal, and what is the evidence that it is worthy of devotion? To this question the early Christians gave a very definite answer. It was the empirical community of which they were members, the community that Jesus had founded to be the organ of his spirit, and the evidence that it deserved this loyalty was the fact that his spirit was actually present in its midst imparting to its members spiritual gifts and justifying their faith in their ultimate conformity to his image.

But for Professor Royce this early judgment was mistaken. There is no church anywhere to be found which deserves the name of the beloved community. There is only the idea of what such a church must be if it is to deserve our loyalty. "‘Create me,’ that is the word which the church, considered as an idea, addresses to mankind" (p. 54).

But whence is the dynamic to come which is to make this

creation possible? It was not Jesus who created the church, we are told, but the church which created Christianity, including our picture of Jesus. But now it appears that the church itself is in need of a creator. Whence is the needed help to come? Who is to create the church, or, since the idea of the church is already in existence, whence came that idea, and what is its promise for the future?

It would seem natural to us that it came from God. God is the real creator of the church, as he is the ultimate explanation of Christ; He is the unseen Spirit who is at once the ideal and the dynamic of its realization in history. Here at least would seem to be the unifying concept of which we are in search.

And indeed there are passages in *The Problem of Christianity* which seem to point in this direction. More than once we find the author identifying the spirit of Christ with the church, and both with God, (*e. g.*, pp. 202, 409). And in the final constructive volume the synthesis between the community and God is complete. The church, the beloved community, the company of the loyal is itself God, the only God apparently for which Professor Royce has room in his re-definition of Christianity.

But is this really an adequate account of what God means to the Christian? What we need in our God; what the early Christians found in theirs, is a *creator*, but the God of Professor Royce is still to be created. He exists in idea indeed, as the beloved community which calls forth the loyalty of all the loyal. But he exists in idea only, awaiting his realization in that world of the concrete and the individual we call history.

Whatever this conception of God may be, it is surely not Christian. The Christian God is the God who is realizing his will in history; first in the person of Jesus, then in the faithful who have come under the spell of his spirit. He is a God whose nature can be known, in part no doubt, but truly so far as known; through the revelation made through Jesus, the God who can be described as love, because he has wrought a great deed of atonement, and who because he is love and demands love in others, calls forth and deserves loyalty.

My criticism of Professor Royce's treatment of Christianity,

then, is twofold: first, that he unduly simplifies Christianity by identifying three conceptions which, however closely related in Christian experience, must ever remain distinct, namely, God, Christ, the church. Secondly, that he empties loyalty of its highest significance by treating it as an end in itself irrespective of the object which calls forth loyalty. (Cf. especially his treatment of the unpardonable sin). It is true that loyalty as Royce defines it is more and other than love, but it is also true—and this is a distinct tenet of Christianity—that it is because Jesus lived and inspired love, in the sense in which Royce distinguishes it from loyalty, that he deserves loyalty. Loyalty in the abstract may lead, no one can tell whither, to militant imperialism as well as to Christian self-sacrifice. That loyalty only deserves the name Christian which is inspired by the type of ethics which finds its most signal, if not its only historic manifestation, in Jesus Christ—the ethics, I mean, which assigns to the individual an independent worth and function as a son of God, with his own peculiar place and responsibilities in the divine family. It is because the church, however imperfectly, is really trying to realize that kind of ideal, and for that reason only, that it can be associated with Jesus as the object of Christian loyalty.

It would seem, then, that in spite of his promise Professor Royce does not give us any real philosophy of history, for history means progress toward an ideal, and for progress Professor Royce's treatment of Christianity leaves no room. An ideal indeed he gives us, but so abstract and empty of content that it can be fitted into almost every conceivable type of experience, and for that reason affords us no standard of judgment by which we can measure the existing conflicts which give zest and pathos to the strifes and failures of the real world. Why this should be; what relation this method of approach has to the type of philosophy of which Professor Royce is so distinguished a representative, is a question which would carry us beyond the limits of the present discussion into regions which, however interesting and fruitful, do not primarily concern us here.

But I would not end upon a note of criticism, but rather with

the renewed expression of the debt of gratitude which I personally, in common with all my colleagues, owe to Professor Royce for his stimulating and searching investigation of a subject matter with which we are so intimately concerned. In these days when so many are defining Christianity in terms of an ethics without religion, it is well to be reminded of those deeper and more metaphysical truths, without which ethics alone would lose its driving power.

In conclusion, I should like to suggest the following questions, the answers to which will tend to clear up the doubts to which I have ventured to give voice:—

1. What is the method by which we must determine what part of the beliefs of a historic religion like Christianity justify their place in universal religion?
2. What is the relation of the ideal community which is the object of loyalty to the existing institutions of society?
3. Where in the modern world can we find the leadership which justifies loyalty?
4. In what sense does Professor Royce give us a God distinct enough to be communed with and good enough to be worshipped?

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