

The Church's Redemptive Mission

For centuries the Church preached otherworldliness. Heaven lay beyond the grave. Christian resignation demanded the acceptance of the inevitability of natural evil and social injustice in this imperfect world. Disasters were characterized as acts of God. Salvation had little to do with the healing of mortal ills. The Church's redemptive mission was generally seen in sacramental rather than humanitarian terms.

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment changed all that. Man as a rational animal was hailed as capable of building heaven on earth. God became an unnecessary hypothesis. Where He was retained as an object of faith, His transcendence gradually gave way to His immanence in the laws of physical nature and the energies of the human mind.

The end result of this influence on Christian faith may be today's secular Christianity — religion without God, religion as social ethics, religion as human solidarity. In such a situation the Church's redemptive mission becomes the Church's reformatory mission. Its concept of healing becomes largely a concept of social surgery, its ultimate ideal barely distinguishable from that of the scientific humanist and the secular humanitarian.

There is no denying the great gains that have been made in bringing Christianity down to earth, so to speak. The mysticism that turns its back on human needs has little support in the New Testament. "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"¹ "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me."²

Yet from the point of view of Christian Science the question arises whether the revolution goes nearly deep enough, whether the social gospel is an adequate remedy for a discredited pietism, whether man can be reconciled to man without a much more profound reconciliation to the God revealed through Christ. Is the thisworldliness of today's popular Christianity anything more than the obverse of yesterday's otherworldliness — a shifting from the supernatural to the natural pole, when what is really needed is a renewed incarnation of the divine in the human?

As long ago as 1875 when the book now known as *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* was first published, its author, Mary Baker Eddy, rejected not only the hell-fire pietism of the popular religion of her day but also the bland optimism of the activist faith that was rapidly replacing it. Human life, as she saw it, could at any moment turn into nightmare so long as its material basis went unchallenged. Later, in a single phrase, she anticipated the grimmest features of the century

about to unfold when she wrote of material existence as a ghastly farce.³

When she started *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1908, Mrs. Eddy gave evidence of her conviction of the urgent need for Christian influence to be felt in the areas of politics, economics, and social values. But deeper even than this, according to her teaching, lay the need for a spiritual revolution in men's concept of the very universe they live in.

Behind all our fumbling, belated efforts to achieve racial justice, for instance, lies the irresistible divine fact (as Christian Science explains it) that men in their true, essential being are neither black matter nor white matter but are spiritual — made in the image and likeness of a God who is Spirit and Mind and Truth — and are therefore at one with each other as they are at one with God. This metaphysical fact, when understood in all its depth, has tremendous healing power in the human situation. Like the Copernican revolution, which may at first have seemed to have little bearing on the daily facts of men's lives but which completely transformed their relation to the physical universe, so profound a spiritual revolution in our view of man undercuts the age-old foundations of racism.

Looking at the more immediate scene, we see that society today has thousands of instrumentalities for social action and reform. Committed Christians form the very lifeblood of many

of these organizations and activities, without which the whole machinery of our modern world might well break down into hopeless chaos. The Church's direct and indirect influence in the direction of human decency can hardly be doubted. Yet the hard-bitten radical's criticism of much well-meaning religious idealism has plenty of facts to support it.

For surely the increasing magnitude of the problems confronting humanity far outstrips the capacity of even the most liberally motivated society to cope with them within present frames of reference. If the Church remains committed to purely humanist and humanitarian solutions, it may find itself eventually committed by the logic of events to "scientific" programs (in the control of population growth, for instance) that will make Orwell's 1984 look, by comparison, like 1904.

This is where we need to ask: Is it enough to believe that God has endowed men with the self-sufficiency to solve their problems through the exercise of reason, human ingenuity, and goodwill — even if augmented by heroic self-sacrifice? Is this the meaning of the life of Jesus of Nazareth?

Christian Scientists think not. They are humanist enough to believe in the necessity for reason, ingenuity, goodwill, and self-sacrifice in human affairs. They support the enlightened social reformer's goals and, as individual citizens, they may support in varying degree his methods. But they are con-

vinced that a far more radical power is necessary to save the individual and society from ultimate disintegration — a wholly spiritual power, originating in a source not to be defined in terms of a spatiotemporal universe and a material man. This power they call the Christ.

In *Science and Health* Mrs. Eddy writes, "The divinity of the Christ was made manifest in the humanity of Jesus."⁴ But the humanity of Jesus did not exhaust the Christ, as Christian Scientists understand it. That same Christ-power they see as inexhaustibly present, to be manifested in healing the world's ills just as directly as when Jesus was on earth — and just as radically.

There was nothing otherworldly about his healing of a leper or a cripple, no mere promising of relief beyond the grave; but neither were his methods the methods of scientific humanism, operating within an acceptance of the inexorable rule of physical law. His premise was different in *kind* from the premise of meliorative human systems to which spirit is no more than an evolutionary development of matter.

To Jesus, Spirit was clearly primal substance, the causative Principle of being. It was available to men through direct apprehension, not merely through the cultivation of secondary human skills. Metaphorically speaking, this Christ-power bore somewhat the same relation to medical skills that atomic power bears to

horsepower. Furthermore, Jesus promised it to all his followers, not as a miraculous dispensation but as the natural outcome of their understanding of the divine realities he had lived forth in their midst. In the account of his healing of the palsied man in Matthew 9, we read, "But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men."⁵

To the Christian Scientist this is the significance of the spiritual healing of physical disease today. It is a single instance of a divine power that cuts across the generally accepted categories of human power in a revolutionary way. As such, it offers a striking challenge to the Christian and to the Church to bring that same spiritual power to bear on all the individual and social problems of the world. The Saviour's healing of the leper and the cripple was not irrelevant to the larger needs of a leprous and crippled society. In demonstrating the power of God — a God whom the New Testament describes as Love itself — to transform and reshape the individual human being, he was demonstrating the power of that same divine Love to transform and reshape society.

"Ye are the salt of the earth," he said to his followers, "but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted?"⁶ If the Church allows itself to become only one more welfare or reform organization among many, then it stands to lose its unique power and

may well end up committed to a program of stifling social coercion rather than of liberating social redemption — to the ethics of the ant-heap rather than of the Kingdom.

Surely the Church has a continuing commitment to awaken in its members that blazing sense of spiritual power, reality, and love which *heals*. And does this not properly begin with the healing of the Christian's own alienation from his divine source? Individual redemption remains a vital wellspring of genuine social therapy.

¹ I John 4:20; ² Matt. 25:45; ³ *Science and Health*, p. 272; ⁴ *ibid.*, p. 25; ⁵ Matt. 9:8; ⁶ Matt. 5:13.