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UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

WHY DO RELIGIONS DIE?—A REPLY

Before we shall be able to answer the question, Why do religions die? we must ask for clearer definition of what a religion is and what it means for a religion to die. Human life has persisted on the planet because man has come to terms in some way with the realities of his enviroing world. This complex of customs which give security to life is at the basis of his religion. It is this social organization which meets the life-needs, embodies life's ideals and provides the technique of security, which endures. It is to these age-old habits and customs that the emotional life is attached. It is this structure which offers the resistance to new conceptual interpretations of cosmic realities and it is this which must be changed when a new religion is introduced or religious reformation accomplished. The religious idealist who is unable to embody his religion in social organization in such a way as to transform the old order remains merely a voice. The experience of Ikhnaton in Egypt is typical. Confucius died broken-hearted; the Han dynasty provided the social organization and Confucianism became a reality. Meh-ti's glowing idealism remains no more than a historic fragrance. Will anyone maintain that the Christianity of the Mediterranean world of the first three centuries was the simple religion of Jesus of Nazareth? Or that orthodox Zoroastrianism of the Achaemenian empire was the high ethical monotheism of Zoroaster? Or that the Christianity of Abyssinia is the Christianity of the Quakers of America? The ultimate factor is always the social order which is the bearer and embodiment of the fundamental interests of life. On this account the question of the life or death of a religion will always be a specific problem in a specific environment. There is no psychic disease which infects religions. When a social order is transformed by the impact of external forces, by the rise of new interests, by new embodied ideas and ideals, the old form of a religion is on the way to death if it fails to come to terms with this new organization of life. This is the problem which faces historic Christianity in our Western world. The "revival of Shinto" and the "secularization of Shinto" are ways of saying that the Japanese leaders are embodying the traditional naturalism of old Japan and the national hopes of new Japan in a new religion under an old name. The so-called

death of Buddhism in India is an excellent illustration of the relentless control of a social mind set in old forms. The soul of India always underlay the agnostic ethical way of salvation of Gautama and when, after a few centuries, the ontology of Buddhism was assimilated to the philosophic idealism of the old world-view and Buddha was represented as an avatar of the Supreme, there was little left either for the intellectuals or for the populace to differentiate Buddhism from the Hindu systems, philosophic and sectarian. It was not so much death as absorption.

The case of an invading or missionary religion furnishes another illustration. There are two possibilities—either to transform the social order or to adopt it and give it a new name. The latter is the usual method in historic fact. Did paganism die in northern and central Europe or was it christened? The laments of John Chrysostom and the advice to missionaries from Catholic leaders to embody the old forms are revealing. Under many of the saints, under Hallowe'en, All Souls, Easter, is the evidence of what took place. Lawson's studies in modern Greece show that the old folk-religion still lives after all the centuries. The case of Buddhism in Japan is clearer. The old religion was not uprooted but overlaid and renamed. A modern Japanese intellectual may turn to the sun as the material symbol of the Absolute Buddha, Dainichi, but the non-philosophical populace still feels the heart thrilled by devotion to the sun-goddess Amaterasu. Can a religion be said to die because it is given a new name?

When the basis of religion in life and life's needs and its embodiment in social customs are neglected it is easy to think of a religion in terms of doctrine and cult. This presents a difficulty, for changes *do* take place. Then comes the search for an "essence" or "type" or "fundamentals" as the meaning of the *real* religion. It is a fruitless quest. Doctrines, devitalized institutions, and forms die: but the religion of a people does not die, for our religion, the world over, is just the way we orient ourselves to cosmic realities in the interests of our larger life. A growing religion adjusts itself to the new social order and the new world-view and the old name carries on. So Christianity and Buddhism have, in the past, died that they might live.

The normal program for a modern religion, then, would be to discover what cosmic realities may be depended upon, to face life's problems, to survey human resources, to formulate ideals and then seek ways of social organization for the co-operative realization of them: this would be our religion under whatever name. Such a program is made extremely difficult for some of the great religions because of their insistence upon

eternal truths and supernaturally revealed ways of salvation which must not change. Here they face a modern crisis in their history, for life will not be denied—but that is another problem.

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DOES A PHILOSOPHY OF MORALS TEND TO UNDERMINE THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN A PERSONAL GOD?

The Christian religion has its center of gravity in the belief that the highest existence is personal. That is to say, the Christian reposes his trust in a being who has in the highest degree those powers of self-consciousness and self-direction which we prize the most in ourselves. It is in the exercise of these powers that we come into inner relations with one another and into outer relations with things. Existences which come into conscious relations with one another we call persons. When we call the highest existence (God) personal we mean that we may have in the exercise of our highest powers an experience of relations with him of the same kind as those which we have with human beings at the best.

To the Christian, God truly exists. This is not to say that he exists in the sense in which some object of common knowledge—say, the sun or moon—exists or that our knowledge that he exists is the same in kind as the knowledge that such objects exist. We mean, rather, that the self-conscious self-direction which we ourselves exercise is of the same kind as that which constitutes the universe of things and that the being who exercises it exists for us in the sense in which other self-conscious beings like ourselves exist, namely, that without them our lives could not have the meaning they now have. In both instances the affirmation of existence is an act of faith—we are able to live the life we now consciously live by the confidence that they too exercise the same kind of activity as ourselves. Were it not so, the world would be to us a wilderness and ourselves without any reason for being here.

I call this a Christian faith because Christians, the world over and in all times, have seen in the personality of Jesus (whatever may have been their explanation of his career) an expression of God's own character—his good purpose toward them, his self-communicability to them, his estimate of their worth, his direction of the powers of the universe to their good. The whole meaning of the Christian life of service to men and confidence in one's own ultimate well-being would be thoroughly changed, were this faith to be lost.