

THE AUTHORITY OF THE FAITH

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IN the discussions at Madras of the issues raised in Dr Kraemer's book¹ I continually received the impression that the two main points of view were not so radically at variance with one another as they appeared to be, and that, could the give-and-take of conversation (in which it is not always easy to keep track of terms and their meanings) be succeeded after further reflection by an interchange of written documents, progress might be made towards substantial agreement, though doubtless differences in emphasis and mode of expression would remain. This volume, which provides opportunity for such an interchange, should therefore be of great value.

I propose in this paper to raise one or two points which have occurred to me in re-reading Dr Kraemer's book since, and in the light of, the Madras discussions, in the hope of helping to make clear where, along the road of so much agreement, points of divergence arise.

It did not appear to me that there was any really deep-seated disagreement concerning the positive content of the Christian faith, as indeed was evidenced by the genuine unanimity of the statement of the Faith

¹ *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. H. Kraemer. Edinburgh House Press, 1938, referred to *passim*.

which is reprinted in this volume. If any of us were inclined to interpret Christianity as a system of 'universal and sublime truths and ideals,' or as a 'specimen of religious and moral philosophy,' it was not very apparent. If I rightly apprehend what Dr Kraemer means by 'biblical realism' and by 'the concrete and radical religious realism of the Bible and the Christian faith'—namely, that the Christian faith and message rests on and is concerned with, not 'world views,' but God's activity as Holy Will directly operative amidst the concrete situations of history and challenging the concrete, individual man to decision, which activity is consummated in absolute uniqueness and finality in the Incarnation—then we were, and are, all 'biblical realists.' In this regard much of the earlier part of Dr Kraemer's book gave focused and powerful expression to the main trend of biblical and theological scholarship, and indeed of what appears to be increasingly 'the religious self-consciousness' of Christian people generally to-day. The account which Dr Horton gives in his paper of his thought in recent years is perhaps evidence of the truth of this statement. To say this does not detract from the value of Dr Kraemer's book, for no doubt what he calls 'the trend of our "normal thinking" to treat the Bible as an embodiment of universal truths'—a trend which, if it is unchecked, does produce that deplorable 'modernism' which is hardly recognisable as distinctively Christian at all—still manifests itself in varying degrees in different parts of the world, perhaps indeed in most of us, for none of us can wholly escape the influence of the spirit of the times. But so far as our explicit thinking is concerned, not to speak of our deepest

Christian experience, the matter may be regarded *chose jugée*.

If this be granted, then we are in a position, it seems to me, to clear up some of the ambiguity which attached to a word much used in the discussions, the word 'fulfilment.' In what sense, if in any, it was asked, is Christianity the *fulfilment* of the non-Christian religions? Dr Kraemer himself has a paragraph on the word (p. 123), and it is worth taking a look at because it reflects the confusion of meanings into which, in our discussions, we were always prone to tumble. The word appears in this paragraph to carry three different meanings.

First, the non-Christian faiths may be said to find their fulfilment in Christianity in the sense that their highest insights are such that they only require some development, correction and supplementation in order to end in the essence of Christianity. Clearly if what we have just said about the concrete realism of the Christian faith is true, the word 'fulfilment' in this sense is, as Dr Kraemer firmly declares it to be, entirely inappropriate. There is not room for discussion about that. If the essence of Christianity, whatever else it may be, rests on and reports the act of the Living God in the historic Incarnation, then it is impossible to see how, or in what sense, any development of truths, however rich these may be, can lead up to, prepare for, or find fulfilment in such an act. Only if Christianity were a collection of philosophical or moral truths, might the word 'fulfilment' in this sense be applicable, though it would not necessarily be so. But Christianity being what it is, the word is as inapplicable and improper as

it would be if I were to say that my sketchy knowledge of physics has been fulfilled when I fall downstairs and break my neck. No development of my knowledge could bring me a hair's-breadth nearer the actuality of such a surprising event. The most, I suppose, we could say would be that to believe some things about the universe rather than others might make it easier for a man to entertain the *possibility* of the divine act of Incarnation; but even so, there would remain the unbridgable gulf between the mere thought of its abstract possibility and meeting its actuality in such wise that one veritably encounters the living God through it and is prepared to stake one's whole life in faith upon it.

Second, the word in this context may be taken to mean that the religious aspirations and longings of men which come to expression in the non-Christian faiths find their fulfilment, in the sense of satisfaction, in Christ and in Christ alone. This interpretation of the word is an eminently proper, even unavoidable, one according to ordinary usage, as Dr Kraemer grants, for he says, 'To be sure, in many men and in the religions of mankind there stir deep aspirations, longings and intuitions which find their fulfilment in Christ. . . . Because of that, many a convert to Christianity has had this experience of liberating fulfilment' (pp. 123-4). Nevertheless, Dr Kraemer is clearly very hesitant about even this usage of the term, and counsels us to avoid it. Why? For two reasons, apparently, though in Dr Kraemer's statement they are not clearly differentiated from one another. First, because Christ repudiates and negates the aspirations and longings as such. 'The Cross and its real meaning,' he says, 'is antagonistic to

all human religious aspirations and ends.' Second, because Christ fulfils human aspirations and expectations in an 'entirely unexpected way.' Now these two reasons are obviously different; indeed taken literally they might be held to be contradictory, for if Christ is antagonistic to *all* religious aspirations and ends, there would seem to be none that He could fulfil even in an unexpected way. But leaving that on one side, it is clear that the two reasons affect the use of the word 'fulfilment' very differently. If there are aspirations and longings to which Christ is antagonistic and which He negates, then the word 'fulfilment,' we may agree, is quite inappropriate in relation to them. What is repudiated cannot be fulfilled. But if there are aspirations and longings which are satisfied in an entirely unexpected way, it is a little difficult to see why the word 'fulfilment' should be regarded as wrong. To fulfil a need this way rather than that is still to fulfil it.

I do not think these are merely fine-drawn distinctions. It is never superfluous to clarify terms; moreover, there is a point in the general discussion where, as we shall see at the end of this article, they become not unimportant. At the moment I will content myself with re-stating the two relationships into which Christ might enter with the religious needs and aspirations of non-Christian people. The two relationships are certainly theoretically possible and Dr Kraemer's paragraph appears to suggest that both do in fact occur. First, Christ may repudiate needs and aspirations as such, and second, He may repudiate the way in which such needs and aspirations have hitherto been satisfied. There is no reason, of course, why He should not do both at the same time,

the former in relation to some needs and aspirations, the latter in relation to others. There is a third possibility, which is also frequently an actuality, namely, that Christ may call forth needs and aspirations which have not previously been felt; in that case the word 'fulfilment' would hardly enter into the picture at all, except in the general sense that a man's whole nature might be said to be fulfilled to the degree that his eyes are opened and his latent capacities evoked. It may be agreed that there is a certain artificiality in these distinctions, because in making them we are, as in all reflective analysis, unduly simplifying and dividing things which are in actual experience in complex, organic interplay with one another. Aspirations and their objects do not divide themselves from one another as neatly as analysis suggests. They change and fluctuate and intermingle with one another, and a convert to Christianity might well be hard put to it to know in what terms exactly to report Christ's dealings with him, especially if he is not accustomed to self-analysis and observation. This difficulty would be especially great where aspirations and longings which Christ negates as such are fused with aspirations and longings which He does not negate, but satisfies in a new way. Yet though the distinctions are in this sense artificial, they do reflect the realities, and to that extent they cannot be unimportant.

The third usage of the term 'fulfilment' which finds illustration in Dr Kraemer's paragraph is given in the sentence: 'Moreover, in biblical realism fulfilment means always the fulfilment of God's promises and of His previous preparatory doings.' This is given as a reason for *not* using the word in respect of the relation

between Christianity and other faiths. Now I suggest, with respect, that this is really without any significance at all in relation to the point under discussion, for it amounts to nothing more than a self-evident truism to say that fulfilment in that quite special and restricted sense is not applicable elsewhere. Within the context of the history of Israel, considered as *Heilsgeschichte* con-summated in the Incarnation, the word 'fulfilment' has a special meaning relevant to that context which necessarily forbids its use *in the same sense* in any other context. The word and the context go together, and the sentence does not really amount to more than the truism that the coming of Christ was in the providence of God related to the history of the chosen people in a way that it was not related to any other 'slice of history.' How then can such a truism take on the appearance of significance in relation to the point under discussion? I cannot help wondering whether it does not do so, because it is in fact partially identified with, or not clearly distinguished from, another proposition, the proposition namely that it is improper to speak of God's preparatory doings *in any sense whatever* in the other religious faiths.

This brings us to the heart of the discussion and to the next point on which I think it may be useful to offer a few comments, namely, Dr Kraemer's general theory, or interpretation, of the religious life of mankind. I find this presentation of his views, especially in relation to this question of God's activity in the religious life of mankind, also somewhat confusing, though knowing the power and clarity of his mind I hesitate to think that the views themselves are confused.

A theory, or interpretation, of the religious life of

mankind is always the resultant of an interplay between the data on the one hand and interpretative principles brought to the study of the data on the other. Such an interplay characterises all enquiry, though many people seem to remain unaware of it and to suppose that their conclusions are dictated only by what they call the objective facts, when all the time they are as much determined by prior interpretative principles which they bring with them to the facts. The interplay is peculiarly subtle and difficult to control and direct in any enquiry into things of the mind and spirit, and most difficult of all perhaps in this sphere of the interpretation of religion. It is clear that for a Christian thinker in the sphere of religion the interpretative principles must derive ultimately from his experience and understanding of the Christian revelation, so that we have to ask concerning any theory offered by such a thinker: first, does he cover the ostensible data? and, secondly, what are his interpretative principles—are they satisfactory and the only ones open to a Christian? It is important to keep these two questions before the mind, for otherwise it is easy to suppose that a thinker is speaking on the authority of data when all the time he is speaking with no greater authority than may attach to that particular understanding of the Christian revelation which he happens to hold.

Bearing these considerations in mind, then, let us look at Dr Kraemer's theory of religion.

I do not think it can be questioned that the main weight of the theory is in the direction of affirming that the religious life of mankind is essentially a product of man's own efforts to manage the world in such wise that

his own self and his clamant needs are satisfied. Religion, as part of man's effort to manage things in his own interest, is more than once put on a level with his other enterprises in science, philosophy, art, etc., the only difference being that a different function of his being is engaged. The objects to which the religious impulse is directed, by which indeed it is defined as religious, for apart from its object it is but another manifestation of the general urge towards self-maintenance and self-enrichment, are variously described by Dr Kraemer. Religion is an effort 'to apprehend the totality of existence,' 'to realise the self as divine' (i.e. as not subject to the changes and chances of this mortal life), 'to perpetuate and strengthen individual and corporate life' by merging it in a larger life, 'to achieve the *summum bonum*, conceived in terms of absolute happiness,' and so on. All religions are therefore monistic, naturalistic and vitalistic, relativistic, eudaemonistic. It is true that Dr Kraemer speaks more than once of God 'wrestling with man' in, and shining through, the religions, and in one place at least he speaks of God 'revealing' Himself, though the word is difficult to harmonise with what is said elsewhere about revelation, as we shall see; but whatever it is that is intended by these phrases, it is not wrought up into the main theory of the specifically religious experience, for indeed the same phrases are used of intellect, art, morals, culture (e.g. pp. 120-1, 125). The main impression left, I repeat, is that the central driving force of man's religious life is self-affirmation and self-insurance.

Does this cover all the facts? It is surely open to question whether it does. The theory seems, at any

rate as stated, to leave out of account that awareness of God as One who makes sacred or absolute *demand* which can be discerned in varying form at the heart of the religious life of mankind, and which continually limits and checks and alters the content and direction of—though it is often, we agree, deplorably submerged in—the impulse to use God merely as an adjunct to one's own lust for security and happiness and power. In fact, it seems to leave out of account that central aspect of religion on which, for example, Oman's understanding of religion is built in his massive book, *The Natural and the Supernatural*. Directly this element is recognised, and it seems to me that the facts force us to recognise it, some of the things which Dr Kraemer says about religions begin to look like somewhat sweeping generalisations in urgent need of qualification. Religions are 'monistic.' Yes, they are, but equally much they insist on dichotomising the world into sacred and non-sacred. Thus Professor Bowman is able to say in his *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*: 'In all religions . . . we are confronted by a stupendous dualism, which includes in one comprehensive sweep all the objects and interests and issues of man's life.' Religions are 'naturalistic.' Yes, they are, but equally much they are supernaturalistic. Religions are relativistic. Yes, they are, but what tremendous absolutes appear in their midst—even the crudest religion has its tabus. Religions are eudaemonistic, life-affirming. Yes, they are, but how frequently does there spring up within them an imperious demand to surrender even life itself. To sum up, the element of awareness of God as sacred or absolute demand surely makes it difficult to conceive

religion mainly in terms of self-affirmation and enrichment; there is at the heart of it a pressure which is felt as powerfully checking and limiting in some way such desires.¹

If now we turn to interpretative principles, I would hazard the suggestion, which I observe Dr Hogg also makes in a footnote, that this whole 'humanistic' way of interpreting the religious life of mankind derives to a not inconsiderable degree from a certain prior theological position which it would be better, if possible, to draw out into clear statement and to discuss in and for itself before the tangled question of the interpretation of the religious life of mankind is entered upon.

This theological point of view—so far as I can grasp it and can contrive to express it in a single proposition—appears to be that the primal, basic relationship in which God stands to man is one of absolute, sovereign Will; in accordance with this the primal, basic relationship in which man is called to stand to God is conceived to be a relationship of complete and unqualified submission and obedience. Or, to put it relatively, in terms of

¹ Dr Kraemer's failure to do justice to this element in religion is illustrated by the very cursory treatment which he gives on p. 124 to the fact that throughout all the religious life of mankind there runs the tremendous fact of sacrifice. Sacrifice set on one side with the statement that it 'virtually'—blessed word, virtually!—springs from the awareness of the ultimate indigence of man in his efforts to appease the superhuman forces. It is an ultimate measure of insurance, and therefore of self-assertion.' That the self-assertiveness of sin runs through sacrifice need not be questioned, but that the self-assertiveness finds its expression in that particular way, i.e. in a way that whilst it satisfies it also checks it, might be held to be evidence that God is actively holding man to Himself even in his disobedience and sin.

what I suspect is the underlying theology of the opposed position, the primal relationship is not thought of as Fatherly Love. Of course love is predicated of God, but the idea of love, I venture to suggest, is almost wholly submerged in the idea of sovereignty. Now the problem of the relationship of the divine love to the divine sovereignty is no doubt a very hard one for any theology, as the history of theological thought shows clearly enough, but the point is that the problem is there, and I believe it lies behind the divergence of views now under discussion. It is much easier for those who set the primal emphasis on sovereignty to view the religious life of mankind on the one hand and God on the other as standing over against one another in a kind of isolation, than it is for those who set the primal emphasis on fatherly love. And this is the more so when to the original doctrine of God as sovereign will there is added the derivative doctrine of sin as rank disobedience and rebellion. Sovereign will standing over against the will of man is not—I do not know how to put it—is not such a holding, binding, cleaving, seeking, yearning relationship as the Love of a Father which cannot and will not let men go; and I believe that as the mind is filled with the one thought or the other, so one's attitude is unconsciously determined in the matters under discussion, as in other things. Thus, to consider only the kind of view of the religious life of mankind of which Dr Kraemer's theory is a representative, the approach from the angle of God's absolute sovereign will results in what seems, to the view which approaches it more from the angle of His fatherly love, a curiously grudging and negative description of God's

relation to men in their religious life, even when this is at its highest and best. It is described as a 'wrestling with the spirit of man' or in vague phrases like 'shining through' or 'leaving Himself not without witness.' Or again, the idea of God entering into an *educative* relationship to the spirit of man in and through the religious awareness, instead of being examined to see whether it does not, despite the manifest pitfalls there are in it, conserve some essential aspects of personal relationship, is dismissed in what seems to those who start from the other angle a far too summary way. Or again, man's seeking the help of God in prayer and sacrifice for his own human ends—all that side of religion which in its perversion becomes grossly eudaemonistic and egocentric—is too easily set on one side without any consideration of the possibility, which indeed to those who start from the other angle seems to be an almost self-evident necessity, that God should be interested in the ordinary everyday needs of His children in relation to the difficult and dangerous world into which He has put them, and should desire and delight in their seeking of His co-operation and help. This last thought no doubt can be expressed in very immature and childishly anthropomorphic ways, but it can also be expressed in a way that opens up the deepest things of the personal relationship with Himself into which God has created man.

This brings us to the word 'revelation.' Here again perplexity, it seems to me, arises through a not very clear and unambiguous use of a word. More than once when Dr Kraemer gives us a definition or description of Revelation it is in terms, the effect of which is, indeed

one feels is intended to be, to reserve the word exclusively for God's unique and 'once-for-all' disclosure and giving of Himself to man in Christ. The most notable example of this is on p. 118, where we read: 'Revelation is an act of God, an act of divine grace for forlorn man and a forlorn world by which He condescends to reveal His Will and His Heart, and which, just because it is revelation, remains hidden except to the eye of faith, and even then remains an incomprehensible miracle.' These words can hardly refer to anything other than the Incarnation. The same reference is, I suspect, implicit in other definitions of the term, though it is less clearly evident. Now anyone is at liberty to define terms as he wishes, and if it is once and for all clear that when we speak of Revelation we mean Incarnation and all that prepared the way for it in Israel, no harm need be done. But such an unusual definition is apt to have two unfortunate consequences: first, those who make such a definition inevitably become hesitant about speaking of God's positive activity in other religions, for it is difficult to speak of God's active dealing with man except as revelation; and second, those who do use the word in its more ordinary sense to denote what they believe to be God's direct activity in other faiths are made to feel that they have done something theologically dreadful, almost betrayed the Gospel itself, when all that has really happened is that there has been discrepancy in the use of a term. The difficulty of abiding by such a non-natural usage of the term and the resulting confusion is perhaps evidenced by the fact, already alluded to, that Dr Kraemer does in one place speak of God revealing Himself in other religions; but no attempt is made to

say what exactly is meant by the term in this connection, or to relate it to the more elaborate definitions of revelation given elsewhere, and his general theory of religion remains one which is set forth in almost exclusively humanistic terms.

In my book *The World and God*, if I may be permitted the reference, I have attempted an analysis of the idea of revelation as a religious term which shall, at one and the same time, make it possible to include under it both God's activity in non-Christian faiths and His final saving approach to mankind in the Incarnation, without so far as I can see reducing the utter, incommensurable uniqueness of the latter. According to such usage revelation is essentially a term of personal relationship, and a transaction of revelation—the approach of God as Personal Will, of Holy Love claiming and succouring man, on the one hand, and man's response to it, even in an immature and corrupt form, on the other—is by its essential nature an event in the personal history of the individual concerned. As such, its reality and intimate quality as living transaction with God who in His Love grasps men even in their sin and disobedience, as also its significance in the unfolding history of the individual, is inaccessible to the observation of others. In this sense I would agree with what Dr Kraemer says about the essential inaccessibility of revelation (though I am doubtful whether I mean it in the same sense as he) and about the impossibility of indicating systematically and concretely where such revelational transaction has in fact taken place in the sin-corrupted though never entirely God-forsaken experience of men and women. Though I cannot see why we should not regard the

coming to expression in other religions of beliefs and attitudes, not altogether without truth and nobility according to the Christian standard, as presumptive evidence that God has, in fact, been doing what our knowledge of Him as love would lead us to expect He would do, namely, actively reveal Himself in the inner life of men and women, even though in the nature of the case it is impossible to say where exactly or how.

The mention of the essentially personal nature of the transaction of revelation and of its inaccessibility to external observation leads me to say a concluding word on another aspect of these matters which was discussed at Tambaram. What is the relation of a convert's new-found faith in Christ to his previous religious experience?

The interesting thing here is that there has apparently been from the beginning of Christianity a certain conflict of testimony on the part of converts to the Christian faith. Some, looking back on their pre-Christian experience, see in it elements which have prepared them for, and been a forerunner to, some at least of the riches which are now theirs in Christ; in some real sense they see their whole religious history as having lain within the grasp of the good God who has now finally and fully disclosed Himself to them in Christ. Others on the other hand feel that Christ has shattered completely their pre-Christian world; they see in their former experience only darkness and evil, from which God in His great mercy has now rescued them. At first sight this conflict appears somewhat perturbing, and accordingly efforts are made to dispose of it by saying (according to the point of view) that either one or the other class of witness is not truly reporting his experience,

or is resting on an immature and incomplete understanding of the Christian message and life. I am inclined to think that we can take this conflict of testimony too seriously. In view of the ambiguity of the word 'fulfilment'—noted at the beginning of this article—it may refer either to needs and aspirations as such, or to the objects in which satisfaction for needs and aspirations is sought, or to needs and aspirations which Christ evokes for the first time, but which, to be evoked, in a sense must have been already there; in view also of the difficulty of separating these from one another in the complex and changing interplay in the inner life; in view finally of temperamental differences, it is not surprising that there should be variety of testimony in this matter. And seeing that each man's experience is always incomplete, and that in any case God's dealings with every soul are intensely personal and inaccessible to the outside observer, I do not see why we should not accept each report as being, so far as it goes, substantially true. I say 'so far as it goes,' because, as I have just said, experience is always at any one moment incomplete, and because there seems to me to be another type of personal history, possibly more mature and advanced than those already referred to. Sometimes those who start their Christian life with a dominant sense of Christ's searching judgment on and condemnation of what has gone before come later to speak of Him without any sense of self-contradiction as in another sense fulfilment of what has gone before; on the other hand, those who start with a dominant sense of fulfilment do often come later to speak with greater emphasis of His work as judge. This would seem to indicate that Christ is always,

for everyone of us, though we come at it from different angles, according to our history, both final judge and final fulfilment; in the very process of judging He releases and fulfils; in the very process of release and fulfilment He most searchingly judges. And I do not see why we may not let it rest at that.