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CHRISTIAN AND PAGAN ETHICS GORDON H. CLARK

WHILE Stoicism and Epicureanism were at their height, there spread through the Greco-Roman world several eastern religions. One of these was Christianity. In the literature on the relationships among the eastern religions, the Greek philosophies and Christianity, arguments are advanced to show that Christianity is nothing more than a particular combination of pagan ideas. These attempts to explain Christianity in terms of Greek philosophies and Hellenistic religions have been occasionally extreme. For example, that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is an adaptation of the Neo-Platonic trinity is hardly tenable. The two trinities are totally distinct in attributes, activities, and purposes. Again, the attempt to find in Hermes Trismegistus the source of the Christian plan of salvation, the Christian sacraments and other Christian tenets has been definitely defeated.

Nevertheless there are relations and marked similarities between elements of Christian teaching and elements in the pagan systems. Plato, when he forbids the good man to wrong anyone and declares it is better to suffer than to commit injustice reminds us of Christ's words, "Love your enemies ... do good to them that hate you." Stoicism, too, in one respect profoundly anticipates Christian thinking. To people whose civilization is permeated with Christian ideas, this element will seem common-place, but in an age whose greatest thinkers hardly attained it and whose ordinary people never dreamed it, it was an epoch-making revelation. Before this time, right living had generally been considered as a matter of external action; now the Stoics were the first to emphasize the inwardness of true morality. Internal reformation was essential. Further, the Stoics are similar to the Christians in dividing all people into two groups, the wise and the foolish, the saved and the lost. They again were no less severe in their manner of asserting that "whosoever shall keep the whole law and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." Like Christianity, too, Stoicism appealed to all classes of society, it welcomed the slave as well as the Emperor.

It was the differences, however, and not the similarities which attracted the attention of those to whom Christianity first was preached. Superficial agreement did not obscure the fundamental antagonism. To the educated, respectable citizen of the first century it was not paganism but Christianity which appeared immoral and atheistic. The Greeks charged Christians with defective education, the Romans accused them of defective patriotism. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* the Romans designate the Christians as atheists, and Lucian slurringly puts Epicureans, atheists, and

Christians into one class. And finally, the persecution through which the church was called upon to go shows that in the minds of those who saw paganism and Christianity at first hand, the latter was not merely another innocuous pagan sect.

There is one fundamental difference between the pagan and Christian theories which makes all other differences appear subsidiary. According to Greek philosophy the chief end of man was the perfect development of his natural abilities. Aristotle made contemplation the height of man's attainment because he regarded reason as man's highest function. The Stoics said, "nature herself never gives us any but good inclinations." And also, according to Epictetus, "you are a distinct portion of the essence of God and contain a certain part of him in yourself," cultivate, therefore the god within you. And other schools say similar things.

But Christianity has a totally different aim, indeed not merely a different but a radically opposed aim. In the New Testament there is no exhortation to develop the natural abilities, the desirable thing is rather the death of the natural man and the birth of a new and supernatural man. As originally born and even before birth, man is guilty of sin and fatally impaired by it throughout his whole nature. No individual can escape its terrible consequences for it is inherent in the race. In Adam all die, with the result that their understanding is darkened, being alienated from the life of God because of the blindness of their heart. All have sinned, there is none righteous, no not one, and they are hereby rendered incapable of pleasing God in any respect whatsoever. To man so conceived no wonder it is said, "except a man be born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God." And a few verses below that just quoted the contrast between the natural and the spiritual is made very distinct. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The chief aim of man, then, will not be the development of his natural but of the spiritual nature. The new life which begins with the new birth leads in precisely the opposite direction to the Greek formulae. "For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting." From this fundamental proposition flow all the other differences.

In Greek ethics it was customary to distinguish between the practical or moral virtues, such as courage, justice, honor, and the theoretical or intellectual virtues. In both of these departments of life the fundamental chasm appears between the widely separated results. The names by which the virtues are called are sometimes the same but the concepts for which they stand are often quite different. For example, both the Greek and the Christian would call wisdom good. But what Aristotle and Epicurus called wisdom and thought good, the Christian might call foolishness. Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, we might say all pagan antiquity, so emphasized wisdom as to consider only the wise man, only the philosopher, as strictly virtuous. In the Bible as well, not only in the books of Solomon but in many

other passages also, wisdom receives no meagre praise. But in the New Testament the natural wisdom of the Greeks which engenders pride is regarded as a possible stumbling block on the way to the Kingdom of God. Christ sent Paul "to preach the gospel; not with wisdom of word lest the cross of Christ be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish, foolishness. For it is written I will destroy the wisdom of the wise... Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?"

First Corinthians clearly states that the natural man is by his very nature incapable of understanding true wisdom. The wisdom of God is Jesus Christ himself, a reference to the opposing claims of the Gnostics, and in Him, as Colossians continues, are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And the evil deeds proceeding from the darkened understanding mentioned in Romans 1:21-28 and elsewhere, include among them some of the moral or practical virtues which were so highly praised by the Greek philosophers.

It may seem strange at first that the moral virtues, even of a pagan, are considered worthless from a Christian standpoint. But Christianity goes further and declares them to be not only worthless but actually dangerous and harmful because, seeming good, they deceive. They lead us to put our trust in them, to rely on them alone, whereas "without faith it is impossible to please God." The virtuous Greek was not able to see his need of a new birth. Deceived by his own morality he was blinded to his own imperfection.

The most highly valued virtue in the ancient world and the one least prized by Christians was courage or patriotism. This, as Aristotle said, mirroring the prevailing conception, was essentially a political and wartime virtue. But the followers of the Christ who told Peter to sheath his sword, who declared that his kingdom was not of this world, abandoned the practice of courage and patriotism. They were willing to bear persecution; fortitude was their strong point but patriotism was a vice. In this world the Christian is a pilgrim and a stranger. He is looking for a city whose builder and maker is God, his citizenship is in heaven. The followers of Christ were willing to render to Caesar what was Caesar's. Obedience to all laws which did not conflict with Christian principles they insisted upon. But their main attention was directed to rendering unto God what was God's.

Among the virtues catalogued by Aristotle, pride or high-mindedness is called the "crown of the virtues." Though Aristotle warns against conceit, yet the high-minded man "will be only moderately pleased at great honors conferred upon him by virtuous people, as feeling that he obtains what is naturally his due or even less than his due." Christianity, on the contrary, emphasizes humility. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," and "whosoever will be great among you shall be your minister; and whosoever of you will be the chiefest shall be the servant of all."

The astounding thing is that while the Greek schools in general appealed only to a select class of especially educated people and even with those usually failed of actual reform, as is pictured for us in Kingsley's gripping novel *Hypatia*, and while the comparatively wide appeal of the Stoics neither affected the masses nor stayed the corruption of the Emperor's court, Christianity within twenty-five years of its inception gave a totally new life to thousands and thousands. This new life most noticeably expressed itself in a virtue which the Stoics condemned and which certainly was absent from the practice of the public. In *Ben Hur*; or in the sources if they be open to us, the most abominable cruelty makes us recoil. Against this the Christians preached and practiced love, pity, mercy. The Founder had a word of compassion for the woman taken in adultery, for the thief on the cross and for the very ones who crucify him, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." And in *Quo Vadis* the Christian, as he is being tortured on a cross, forgives and thereby converts Chilo Chilonides, his betrayer.

Stoicism never achieved this state of mind. While it taught that all men were brothers, that the Sage will serve all, one would err if he admitted their troubles to his heart. For the Stoic's unperturbedness is all important and the anguish of vicarious suffering, the very foundation of Christianity, is absolutely foreign both to Stoicism and to all the other schools. Love, then, is the striking Christian virtue. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," and, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. . . . And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

We can note only in passing that Epictetus says we must not be too hard on men who are unchaste before marriage; and Aristotle is somewhat similar. But Christianity has hardly had in the eyes of the world a more singular success than its erasure of the distinction between bond and free, male and female, for all are one in Christ. And if anyone point to Christianity's shortcomings in this and in many other respects, it is because he refuses to compare conditions here and now with what is in India today or what was universal in the time of Christ. The love of God in Christ reflected in the lives of his followers is a conquering power that the forces of darkness cannot withstand.

And finally. While the philosophers gave up the dreary conceptions of an after life as taught by Homer, they had nothing very definite as a substitute, and certainly the ordinary Greek never conquered his fear of death. His affections were set on this world and death meant defeat. Among the papyri there is a friendly letter on the death of a child. The most conspicuous thing about it is its utter lack of consolation; it says in so many words that consolation in such a case is impossible. But for the Christian death is swallowed up in victory and the grave has lost its sting. This is the actual result of

that other-worldliness which some condemn as sour and glum. But it is the pagan, of today as well as of that time,

who comes to be sad if he considers life seriously, while the Christian through a very sure hope can remain happy in the face of misfortune. "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."