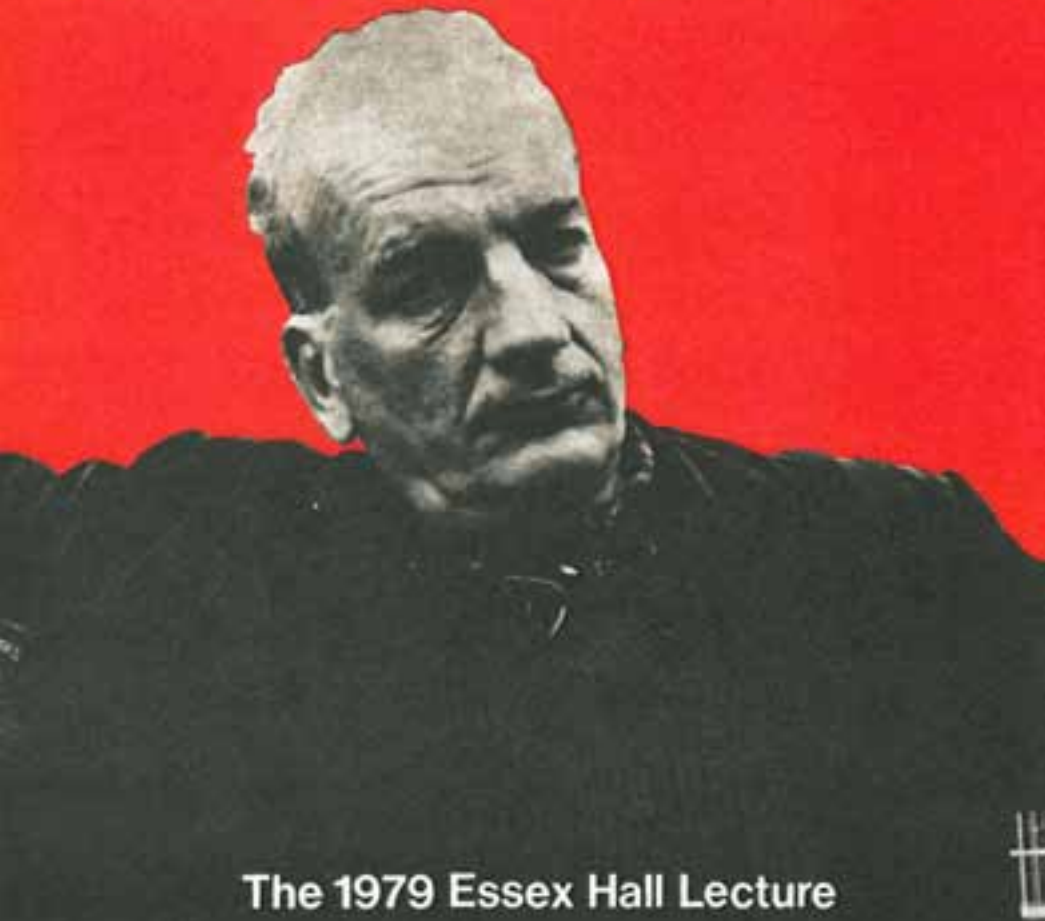
Christians, Then and Now

PHILIP TOYNBEE



The 1979 Essex Hall Lecture

Philip Toynbee

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CHRISTIANS, THEN AND NOW

"THE MODERN WORLD" is a phrase which arouses violently different emotions in different members of it, but it might be generally agreed that an apt historical title for it would be *The Age of Analysis*. Indeed scientists have so accustomed us to deciding what a thing is by asking what it is made of that this has come to seem the only reasonable procedure. Think, after all, what brilliant results have been achieved by breaking down the objects of scientific examination into their smallest possible constituent parts.

By what may now seem a highly dubious analogy Freud and his followers set out to treat the human mind in the same way. In the manner of an anatomist Freud divided the mind up into different parts, labelled them according to their functions and set about curing their malfunctions in the same kind of way that an ordinary diagnostician treats the human body. Psychiatrists are now a part of our popular folklore: with a strange mixture of fear, awe and disdain we call them shrinks; or trick-cyclists. And though very few practising psychiatrists are now dogmatic Freudians what has survived is a general tendency to probe the mind with a view to healing it. And this in turn has led us to make amateur analyses of our own minds. "Trouble with me is I've got a mother-fixation" is a perfectly probable thing to overhear in a pub or on a bus. *The Age of Analysis* has also become *The Age of Self-Consciousness.*

Meanwhile a quite distinct intellectual movement of our time has also sprung from the habit of analysis and has helped to lead us into the condition of extreme self-consciousness. This was the Viennese philosophical school of Logical Positivism which produced as one of its heirs the Anglo-American school of Linguistic Analysis. Very roughly speaking the central faith of these two movements was that most, if not all, philosophical problems could be reduced to problems of language. Professor Joad's famous "It depends what you mean by . . ." on the wartime Brains Trust was the popularisation of this attitude; and nowadays most of us are at least vaguely aware that whenever we have to think hard about a subject we have to think hard about the ambiguities of our language. *We live in The Age of Semantics.*

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So I, a product of *The Age of Analysis, The Age of Semantics, The Age of Self-Consciousness,* feel obliged to begin this talk by discussing what I mean by its title. But since the first term is the difficult one I don't intend to spend very much time on the other two.

Time implies place: the words "then" and "now" imply somewhere. My somewhere will be what are now generally called the Advanced Industrial Countries — with special reference to England, which is the one I know far the best. In fact this geographical term corresponds well enough with what used to be called "Christendom (the obvious exceptions are Japan in one direction; Latin America in the other).

As for my "Then" I take it to mean any time within Christendom between the first and nineteenth centuries; and my "Now" shall be our own century with particular emphasis on the years 1978 and 1979. (I am writing this in 1978: I hope to be speaking it in 1979.)

And now comes the hard part. But since a definition has just come my way I shall leap on it with the gratitude of one amateur semanticist to another. Father von Balthasar, who has written a fine and famous book about prayer, has also written a little paperback called "*Who is a Christian?*". Here, after an uneasy preamble fifty times longer than mine, he finally arrives at his definition: "A primary and inescapable assertion for everyone who truly believes in Christ's life work is that Christ is the only Son of the Father, the sole intermediary between God and men, the only Saviour who on the Cross has given satisfaction for all: the first-born (first-fruit) of those raised from the dead, who, according to St Paul, is the first principle of all things."

In other words Father von Balthasar denies the title of Christian to anyone who does not fully accept the doctrines of the Trinity, the (unique) Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection and the Pre-existent Logos.

If he were asked by what authority he delivers this definition he would probably answer, by the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. But he might answer, with a more generally accepted cogency, by the authority of traditional usage: the holding of these beliefs has been very widely associated, and for a very long time, with the claim to be a Christian. In fact, of course — as von Balthasar knows well and you know even better — men and women have been calling themselves Christians ever since the first century without conforming to this doctrinal test. And in our *Age of Analysis*, our *Age of Semantics*, our *Age of Self-consciousness* the term has been scrutinised, disputed and worried over as never before, though mercifully with a great deal less ferocity now than then.

As for me, I must reject von Balthasar's right to tell me whether or not I may call myself a Christian: yet, by the very fact of this rejection, I must try to say what I *do* mean when I give myself that very ambiguous title. Here, then, is an attempt to describe what seems to me to be the essential and enduring core of the Christian faith.

I call myself a Christian because I discern in the New Testament a man whose life, death and central teaching penetrate more deeply into the mysterious reality of our condition than anyone or anything else has ever done. In the Gospels, the Acts and the Epistles I find a total view of what man is, of what he could and ought to be, which evokes a response in me such as no other writings have ever evoked. For me the heart of the New Testament is the assurance that there is a God whose power lies in his total love; that this God not only transcends the natural world but also enters that world through the minds and hearts of men. I accept, with grateful love, the supreme commandment given to his disciples by the Jesus of St Luke's gospel: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.'

I believe that man's highest destiny on earth is to be born again into the Kingdom of Heaven. I believe that God is spirit, and that those who would come to Him must come in spirit and in truth. I believe that perfect love casteth out fear, and that the truth shall make us free. I know that for me Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and that this way is my only hope of learning to love God as I am already loved by Him. I believe that this way can lead us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us; bless those who curse us and pray for those who ill-treat us. I believe that those are blesséd whom Jesus named as blesséd in the Sermon on the Mount, and that through being blesséd in those ways we can receive a heavenly peace which is deeper than any that the world can give us.

When I pray in formal words the words I use are these: "Lord, help us to receive your loving wisdom, and so to live by the holy light within us. Through Jesus Christ our brother and bringer of light." I believe that Jesus died for us in the sense that he accepted an agonising death rather than abjure his message of a heavenly love which far transcends even the most venerable of holy laws and sacred traditions.

I think it likely that Jesus was revealed to his disciples after his physical death, but it is not this belief which leads me to call myself a Christian.

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Thus, by painful analysis, awkward self-consciousness, much searching for new words and much reliance on old ones, a man who calls himself a Christian has tried to explain what he means by the word. But although this is self-evidently a personal statement I am by no means resigned to calling it a subjective one.

In the confused and often torrid spiritual climate of our time there has been a strong tendency to say that all ways are equally valid; that the individual traveller must simply choose the path which suits him best. A popular image has been that of a mountain wreathed in mist, and of climbers trying to ascend it by many different routes. It is said that the invisible mountain-top is the same, almost-impossible goal of every climber, and that although some climbers reach higher than others this is not dependent on choosing any single route which is "the best". It is dependent solely on the spiritual gifts and spiritual labours of the individual mountaineer.

Now this is a very persuasive image, and its popularity has surely signified a healthy reaction against that earlier — and peculiarly Christian — conviction that, whereas one's own route does indeed lead upward towards the mountain-top of Heaven, all the others lead steeply downwards into hell. Yet a moment's thought will surely show that though a purely subjectivist attitude to one's own faith may be both humble and broad-minded it is also quite impossible to sustain. Do I believe that the way of St Francis was no better than the way of Torquemada. Or that the attitude of the crusaders towards Moslems was just as right and proper as the attitude of Thomas Merton towards Zen Buddhists?

The answer must surely be, not just that we happen to prefer the attitudes of Francis and Merton, but that we believe them to be more in accordance with the will of God and the deepest message of the gospels. Really so. Verily. In truth. And thus I believe that my description of true Christian faith, however inadequate the words I found for it, is not a new-fangled interpretation of my own but the deepest and inmost faith which has inspired all the greatest Christians of all the Christian ages. For I do not believe that the faith I have outlined is in any sense a reductionist one: I am not saying that Jesus was merely a very good man who said some very wise things: I am saying that Jesus was filled with God, and that in most of what he said and did and suffered he was speaking and acting directly under that inspiration.

You will have caught the slightly jarring note of that "most of". I do not know how closely the Jesus of the New Testament resembles the man who died at least forty years before the first gospel was written. But I do know that the man who is presented to us in the gospels is the only Jesus we have; and I do know that this man is a humanly contradictory figure who sometimes failed to live up to his own highest teaching. The man who warned us against judging others continually judged the scribes and pharisees with virulent anger: the man who told us to love our enemies sometimes condemned those who refused to accept him to burn everlastingly in hell.

It is an irony of the New Testament that not even Jesus himself could always keep the new and high law which he had given to mankind. And if Jesus was guilty of all-too-human anger how much harder has it been for his followers to love as their master taught them to love. The history of Christianity has been largely a history of their failures.

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The History of Christianity! Beset by our modern habit of stopping short at a familiar phrase and looking at it again I begin to think of the works I have read lately with these words for their title. They usually start with the Apostolic Age, attempting to give us some picture of how the earliest Christians organized themselves for worship and mutual support. This is followed by a review of the early Fathers, from Justin to Origen, explaining their various contributions to Christian thought and belief. And so it continues: the conversion of Constantine; councils, creeds, schisms and heresies; St Augustine against Pelagius; Caesaropapism in Byzantium; the Papacy in its long struggles for power with kings and emperors; the "Christian Renaissance" of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; the Crusades; the Reformation; Nonconformity in England and America; Christian missions East and West . . . the Present Age with its ecumenical movement, second Vatican Council and World Council of Churches . . .

Of course this summary does less than justice to much excellent historical work: but the point that must surely strike a Christian is that whatever his faith may be it has not been captured and revealed in the learned pages of these books. What they have told us about is the organization and development of Christian churches; the public actions of individual prelates; disputes

about doctrine between learned and angry men; wars waged in the name of Christianity either against non-Christians or between Christians of different doctrinal allegiances; the attempts to persuade members of other faiths to accept the sole and saving faith of Jesus Christ; and finally the attempts of divided churches to understand each other better.

Now a traditional Roman Catholic would indeed believe that a history of his Church and its doctrines is a true history of much that is contained in the word "Christianity". To a believer of this kind the Church is a holy institution; founded by Jesus himself when he appointed Peter to be its first leader; inspired by God throughout the ages, at least whenever the popes have spoken *ex cathedra*. For such a believer his Church is the Bride of Christ; a continuing incarnation of the Spirit: its doctrine and its discipline lie near the heart of any truly Christian life. To this man the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pius IX in 1854 is a historical event of profound Christian significance.

Yet I believe that even a devout Roman Catholic would not feel that a history of his Church and its doctrine is *precisely the same thing* as a true history of Christianity. However strong his reliance on Mother Church; however deep his belief in the divine inspiration of her teaching, he knows that his faith is in more than a church and in much more than an assemblage of intellectual propositions.

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The figure who almost always escapes the dragnet of the historian is the individual private man. To the political historian he is simply a voter; to the military historian an unknown soldier in any army; to the social historian the member of a social class. Yet to a Christian this man is neither less nor more important than the greatest of popes or the most learned of theologians. For the central and enduring mystery of the Christian faith is the individual believer as he stands before his God.

It may be that he reaches this ultimate situation by means of a priest and a church and a body of doctrine. It may be that he seeks an intermediary in the form of a saint, or the Virgin Mary. It may be that he finds help in a particular liturgy or in attendance at a meeting of like-minded worshippers. It may be that he dispenses with all these well-tried aids and relies exclusively on private prayer and the direct inspiration of divine love. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength and with all thy mind." In St Matthew's gospel this commandment to love God is separated from what follows it by a slight pause. "And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

In either case Jesus makes it plain that the second commandment, or the second part of the single Great Commandment, is intimately dependent on the first. The man who prays well is a man who loves well and who necessarily shows his love by his actions. And this law of the necessary inference is no less applicable to a solitary hermit than it is to a Christian working in a leper colony. For if the hermit is concerned only with saving his own soul,

or with the union of his own spirit with the Spirit of God then, by that fact alone, he will fail in both his endeavours. The true hermit or mystic knows himself to be a channel for the entry of God into the world; an utterly mysterious channel which nevertheless diffuses the descended Spirit into the heart and minds of others.

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If all this, as I strongly believe, is a truism of true Christian faith then it's clear that a history of Christianity becomes a very problematical enterprise indeed. In fact the whole idea of a full and accurate history is an absurdity; for what can a historian know about the hearts, the souls and the minds of individual Christians over the last two thousand years? Even if he had detailed records of church attendance for every age and area of Christendom; even if he had account-books listing the giving of alms in every congregation since the apostles; even if he could number all the benevolent acts performed by Christians throughout the centuries of our era — all this would profit him nothing. The descent of the Spirit; the illumination of the soul; the manifestation of love — all these are immeasurable by any human standard of measurement.

I had thought, until I thought a little harder, that *A History of Christians* might be a more hopeful undertaking than any so-called *History of Christianity* could ever be. But here the semanticist puts in his oar at once; and I hear the gritty voice of Professor Joad pronouncing from so long ago, "It depends what you mean by a Christian." Better, perhaps, to ask, what *is meant* by a Christian, and when I ask myself that question I arrive at a working minimum of five different meanings. The word is used to mean anyone who would accept the title when offered such alternatives as "an atheist"; "an agnostic"; "A Buddhist", but who goes through none of the outward or inward observances. The word is also used to mean someone who follows the outer observances — says his prayers and goes to church — but whose inner and outer life is otherwise indistinguishable from those of his atheist and agnostic associates. Or the word can mean someone who devotes all his life and energy to what he takes to be the Christian faith, but from this faith the central heart of love seems to be not only missing but flatly contradicted. Or the word can be used of a man who tries as hard as he can to follow the Great Commandment, who sometimes succeeds but often fails; yet whose failure is always the occasion of a renewed devotion to the light. Finally the word may mean someone who has achieved a large and observable measure of success in following the way of love. I shall speak of Nominal Christians for the first category; Observing Christians for the second; Distorted Christians for the third; Working Christians for the fourth; and Saints for the fifth.

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Equipped, by the analytical and self-conscious age in which we live, with these five overlapping, these very rough-and-ready categories, the time has come to take another look at the history of Christians, in the hope that something more direct may at last be said about the title of my talk. What I am confronting now is the widely-accepted dictum that we — we of the Advanced

Industrial Nations; we of what was once called Christendom — are now living in a "Post-Christian Age". This phrase has been more on the lips of Conservative than of Radical Christians, but the feeling that it expresses is widely shared by most kinds of Christians and by virtually all non-believers. Yet the harder I have looked at it, in the light of my five categories, the more uncertain I have become about its meaning.

Perhaps I can explore my uncertainty best by beating another enormous retreat and examining, first of all, a period of Christian history very remote indeed from our own.

In the year 303 AD the Christian minority in the pagan Roman Empire had enjoyed almost complete toleration for nearly fifty years. This period was harshly brought to an end when Diocletian unleashed a savage persecution throughout the empire; a persecution which continued for almost exactly ten years. During that period Christian worship was forbidden and all citizens of the Empire were ordered to take part in official pagan sacrifices. Thousands of Christians suffered martyrdom.

By 350 A.D. Christianity had been the official religion of the Empire for a quarter of a century, and the number of both Nominal and Observing Christians had immeasurably increased. We must suspect however, that many, if not most of these new converts were time-servers: we know that the Christian emperors, Nominal and Observing, were cruel and barbarous fratricides: we know that the Church was now savagely split by rival factions, each calling the others heretics and each appealing to the current emperor for official support in persecuting the others.

So the Christian historian might conclude that the age of the martyrs was an age of better Christians than the age of the second-generation Christian emperors. It might be claimed that a persecuted church is more likely to contain good Christians than a ruling and reigning church. But alas, there is a further irony in store for us. The martyrs may have been heroes of the faith, but those of their kind who survived without apostasising proved to be intolerant and unforgiving bigots towards those other survivors who had lacked the courage to disobey the imperial edicts. The ex-heroes treated their weaker brethren as irredeemable backsliders who must never be allowed into the Church again, however penitent they might be. This was the direct cause of the first major Christian schism.

So it seems that although we may be tempted to prefer the martyrs of 303 to the court sycophants of 350 it is too simple to say that martyrdom is itself a proof of true Christian witness; a noble test of faith's endurance.

Yet at this point another historian might remind us that by 350 the Desert Fathers had already established themselves in the Thebaid. These were the earliest Christian monks, many of them mystics of a high order, most of them devoted servants not only of God but of man as well. And perhaps St Antony and his followers generated enough spiritual force to atone both for the harsh self-righteousness of the surviving heroes and the squalid self-seeking of the courtiers.

Where are the scales to weigh the saints against the rest? They are certainly not to be found on this earth.

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Perhaps, then, we shall find a simpler and more encouraging balance-sheet if we turn again to that famous Age of Faith which used to be praised so highly by the romantic medievalists of fifty years ago. Surely those great cathedrals of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries could have arisen all over Western Europe only out of communities which yearned for the God of Love in some such way as their towers and arches seem to be yearning from earth to heaven. Surely the marvellous life and ministry of St Francis led to a flowering of the purest Christian love since Pentecost itself. Surely the Cistercian revival renewed all that had ever been holiest in Christian monasticism.

Yes, but not only were the peasants condemned to live in a state of brutish and abject poverty: hardly anyone in the Church considered this affliction a proper subject for their concern. And what are we to say of those monstrous expeditions which were given the lofty name of Christian crusades. What are we to say about the ruthless persecution of the Albigensians, or of the popes' overriding concern that they should prove themselves more powerful princes than any temporal prince?

Would it be more pertinent, then, to this vexed question of our so-called "Post-Christian Age" if we were to take a period immediately before that great climacteric date of 1859 when *The Origin of Species* shocked so many pious Victorians into incipient disbelief. In 1828, exactly a hundred and fifty years ago, the cloud of evolution was no bigger than a man's hand on the furthest scientific horizon. In England virtually the whole population were Nominal Christians and a majority were in some degree Observant also. Belief in the literal truth of the whole Bible was widespread even among the educated classes. Methodism was consolidating the gains it had made in the previous century. The Evangelical Movement in the Church of England was campaigning not only against the Slave Trade but also against the grossness and laxity still surviving in their own church from the nadir of the eighteenth century. In that very year the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Bill was an early sign of greater tolerance between Christians of different ecclesiastical allegiances. At Oriel College, Oxford the first seeds of the Oxford Movement were being sown.

Two things emerge with great clarity when we compare the English Christian situation of 1828 with our own: the first is that far more people believed in the full dogmatic apparatus of the churches; the second is that questions of Christian faith and action were major public issues. Disputes within the Church of England between the Low, the High and the Broad were matters of deep concern to all except the deeply submerged working-classes. Today the debate on the ordination of women is good for a jaunty article or two in the newspapers, but is otherwise a matter of purely internal preoccupation to an organization of priests and bishops which has lost the allegiance of all but a tiny minority of laymen. Those who are now trying to

live Christian lives are faced, in 1978, not with martyrdom, not even with hostility, not even with contempt. They are faced with the deadly indifference of their fellow-countrymen, lightened only by occasional bursts of amused curiosity.

But if we believe, as I do, that Christians have always had to live largely against the dominant society around them is it worse for them to be much or little in the news? Is it a good or a bad thing that the present differences between Christians pass almost unnoticed by the general public? Was it better for Christians when the elevation of a particular bishop could be a cause of scandal not only in the newspapers but also in parliament? If we are agreed that Christianity can never be a matter of counting Nominal and Observing heads, what is — and what might be — the particular quality of Christian life in our time?

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The Age of Analysis. The Age of Self-Consciousness. The Age of Semantics. And in his Reith lectures Dr Edward Norman has just added, and deeply deplored, *The Age of Liberalism.* What is certainly true is that many Working Christians in the ex-Christendom of 1978 have had to become Thinking Christians as well: they have had to examine themselves and their beliefs in ways which no Christians have ever had to do in the past. We know, of course, that self-examination has always been part of a Working Christian's proper discipline; but what he used to be in search of was Sin, as defined for him by his ecclesiastical authority. Our current examination includes a questioning of the very nature of Sin, and sometimes a violent shift away from one emphasis and towards another. Away, for example, from failure in precise observance, failure in belief, failure in personal discipline, and towards all kinds of failure in love, failure in honesty with oneself, failure in attention.

Dr Norman is surely right in believing that modern Christians are more tolerant than any generation of their predecessors. But I think he is quite wrong in thinking that genuine tolerance, tolerance as active respect for our neighbour's rights, has been imported into Christianity from some alien humanist tradition. It springs, I believe, from this whole new process of Christian self-examination. Discovering so much wrong in our own history, in our own present thinking and feeling, in our own loveless actions, we have become less piously self-assured about Christian superiority. Analysing many faiths, including the many forms of modern disbelief, we have found much that is good where our predecessors found only evil.

A small minority, then, full of self-doubt, and doubting even some of the most treasured elements in their own faith, surrounded by grey oceans of indifference and much intellectual despair! It sounds a grim enough state of affairs. And indeed there have been many signs over the last thirty years of Christians losing their nerve and reacting with panic to the pressures which this particular age exerts on them. I do not share Dr Norman's belief that Liberalism is the villain of the story: but I do believe that many vocal Christians

confronted by an almost entirely man-centred world, have fallen into the trap of putting the second part of the Great Commandment in front of the first. Avid to show love of their neighbour they have half-forgotten that they can only love him truly through love of God.

This loss of nerve showed itself in a peculiarly abject form about fifteen years ago when several Christian clerics were proclaiming that God had died; when certain theologians were reducing Him to such phrases as "our ultimate concern" or "the deepest level of our being"; when the phrase "religionless Christianity" was much in vogue; when even the modern industrial city was elevated to an almost paradisal glory.

Since then that initially healthy wish to understand other systems of belief has induced at least one English monk to write about Buddhism as if it were somehow higher up the social-spiritual scale than Christianity. The perception that peripheral elements of the great eastern religions can usefully be harmonized with Christian devotional practice has degenerated into respect for forms of meditation which are purely secular and utilitarian. That image of the mountain-top, of which I have already spoken, has led some Christians to overlook the fact that at the top of the Hindu mountain broods an impersonal Bramah, while the the top of the Buddhist mountain is a holy vacuum, free from any taint of Godhood.

At the same time the magic word "dialogue" has been treated as a talisman which is capable even of uniting opposites. Many serious Christians seem to have forgotten that Marxism, Freudianism and Sartrian Existentialism are strongly and overtly anti-Christian systems of belief. All of them deride the Christian vision of man as a vessel for the light of God through the medium of the ministry and sacred death of Jesus Christ. All of them deprive man of what we hold to be his deepest humanity — the loving presence of God above him, around him and within him. A Christian Marxist is as queer a creature as a furred fish.

Again, during the most recent period, sections of the younger generations have been swept by various waves of spiritual excitement, charismatic in mood, often fundamentalist in creed. And this movement, so hopeful in its enthusiasm, leads all too easily into yet another form of man-centred blindness. Instead of setting the newly-converted forward on the long and difficult journey of self-erosion it fills him with that conviction of instant and total justification which seems inseparable from a monstrous self-inflation.

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Other Christians, of course, have stuck resolutely to their guns, regardless of whether those guns have been spiked or not. A minority of Roman Catholics bitterly regret the pontificate of John XIII and regard the Second Vatican Council as the opening of terrifying floodgates. Traditionalists in all churches often seem possessed by the same panic and loss of nerve which has led their radical opponents into a quite contrary form of self-defence. They seem to forget that every "modern world" in turn has been either stolidly or

virulently recalcitrant to true Christian faith and action. They also seem to forget that every modern world in turn has offered its own unique opportunities for Christian endeavour. Instead of recognising the perennial stubbornness of human greed, cruelty and stupidity — their own included — they treat their human environment as if it were uniquely atrocious and corrupting. Instead of perceiving in the perennial resilience of human hope, human energy and human curiosity a gift of God which should be joyfully accepted and turned to happy account, they turn sourly away from every movement of the mind which seems to threaten any aspect of their great barnacled systems of belief. They forget that every genuine increase in human knowledge must, by that alone, be better than the previous ignorance; that the more we know of earthly reality the more ways we have of approaching the Supreme Reality.

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Let's consider the situation once again. A world largely dominated by greed and cruel oppression, in which a small Christian minority confronts either massive indifference or active persecution. The dominant intelligensia lapped in a benevolent but rather weary humanism — sceptical, critical and deeply suspicious of enthusiasm. Against the oppressive deadweight of formal state religions passionate, non-Christian eruptions of spiritual yearning, often taking bizarre and idiosyncratic forms, and often strongly influenced by wise men from the East. The Christians themselves are divided into those who want to cling to old forms and traditional law and those who want to rush forward too eagerly into alien ways. Surely this is a description of the world of St Paul's epistles.

Of course the differences are enormous; but perhaps there is enough in common between the Christian situation in the first century and in our own to make us feel that our age, too, can be an age of renewal and resurrection. It is time to take stock of our advantages.

First, I would say that in this *Age of Analysis* we are better able than any Christians before us to separate the harmful accretions of the Christian religion from the true heart of New Testament faith. St Paul never spoke a creed in his life: he never thought that there was anything sacred either in the haphazard organization of the early Christian communities, or in the widely-differing rituals which Christians chose to use when they worshipped together. He never supposed that there was anything magical about the role or the function of those who were chosen to preside at acts of corporate worship.

There is a sad law which states that all religions tend towards idolatry: to worship only the highest is too difficult, and many of the intended means to that end are elevated into independent ends. Father von Balthasar defines a Christian not by his love of God and neighbour through the medium of Jesus Christ, but by whether he subscribes to a number of theological propositions which were evolved by bitterly-disputing men during the first five centuries after the death of Jesus. But it is open to us to recognise, at this time, that formal creeds and dogmas are at best a sort of metaphorical stutter. We may learn something about God through love, through prayer, through loving

and prayerful action, through mystical contemplation; but this knowledge can never be formulated in the language of human debate. It is open to us to recognise that we do better to praise God together than to argue about which set of words is the least inadequate to describe him. It is time for us to recognise that there is such a thing as an idolatry of verbal formulation.

When Pope John allowed certain fundamental arguments to begin within the Roman Catholic Church he made it possible for Catholics to doubt the divine authority of the human organization to which they belonged. It began to be seen that churches were made for man, not man for any church. It is open to us to recognise, at this time, that there is such a thing as an idolatry of ecclesiastical organization.

In 1889 Edward King, the saintly Bishop of Lincoln, was summoned to appear before a special court presided over by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The points on which the bishop had been attacked were as follows: "The Eastward position during the Prayer of Consecration; lighted candles on the altar; the mixture of water with wine in the Chalice; the Agnus Dei after the Consecration; the sign of the cross at the Absolution and the Blessing; the ablution of the sacred vessels." Not only priests of the Church of England but ordinary newspaper readers and members of parliament were rent with partisan bitterness for and against the bishop and his practices. It is open to us to recognise, at this time, that there is such a thing as an idolatry of the means of public worship.

None of this implies, of course, that we should dispense with churches, or with the use of words in our efforts to describe our faith, or with visible signs of invisible grace when we worship together. But it does imply that our present ability to analyse and examine can be used, not to reduce our faith but to purify it of many top-heavy and usurping inessentials.

Indeed I believe that the churches are now painfully learning the lesson of their demotion from sacred status; the hard reality of their proper function as the servants, and never the masters, of their individual members. I believe that a new humility of the word has led many Christians to search for new, clumsy, untried words with which to express their yearnings and their clouded visions. And I believe that it is now more widely recognised than at any time since the first century that Christians must be free to choose how they shall worship, both together and alone; what forms they shall use and what meanings they shall attach to those forms. (Which doesn't in the least deny that there are those who can and should give spiritual direction, and those many more who should seek it and receive it.) I also believe that although we still have our Distorted Christians, those who believe that everyone outside their own narrow sect will go to eternal perdition, these unfortunates are well outside the mainstream of Christian thought and hope. *Pace* Dr Norman the progression from burning those who differ from us, to damning them to hell, to disdainfully tolerating them, to humbly learning from them, must be a progression in the direction of the Great Commandment.

We may be living in a desert of greed and triviality — ourselves by no

means immune to these dreary vices — but there are many and increasing signs of a new thirst for the waters of the Spirit. The waters Christians offer must be the pure water of the love of God and man, not the stale and brackish liquid of intolerant orthodoxy, nor the bottles of cherry-pop handed out by parsons dressed up in the latest gear.

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Christians and Humanists are worlds apart — quite literally so. But there is at least one major Humanist perception which has been at best peripheral in the Christian tradition and which Christians should gratefully accept from their Humanist brothers. This is the perception that every man has the right, in natural morality, to realise his own potentiality. A man is dehumanized if he is forced unwillingly into abject poverty; into political and social subjection; into sickness of mind or body. To heal a man is to make him as whole as he is congenitally able to be; to make it possible for him to love and to create as best he can.

Because Christians have always recognised the enormous spiritual advantages which may be derived from voluntary poverty, self-chosen obedience, and even wilful sickness, they have often failed to recognise the crippling affliction of enforced poverty, sickness and oppression.

In this herculean task of trying to remove the removable obstacles to man's freeest possible self-development Christians should, and do, work with Humanists as true brothers. Yet the strange thing about this alliance is that the visible end of the journey for the Humanist is simply a stage, for the Christian, on a further and endless journey. The Humanist ideal is of a man richly self-fulfilled; self-reliant yet kindly to others; trustworthy, brave and contented with his lot. The Christian, on the other hand, relies not on himself but on his God, and is never contented with his present state. If he has been largely successful in healing and freeing himself according to the Humanist pattern he is immediately intent on destroying that very self which he has been restoring. For the Christian believes that he must embrace, by his own choice and will, that state of deprivation which he rightly rejected when it was inflicted on him either by others or by his own unchosen disabilities.

Here is a passage from the best spiritual director I have yet found, Francois de Fénelon, Archbishop of Cambrai in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: "Almost all who aim at serving God do so more or less for their own sake. They want to win, not to lose; to be comforted, not to suffer; to possess, not to be despoiled; to increase, not to diminish. Yet all the while our whole interior progress consists in losing, sacrificing, decreasing, humbling and stripping self even of God's own gifts, so as to be wholly His."

To the Humanist, folly: worse than folly — a sick aberration. To many of us would-be Christians, a stumbling-block. And how absurd the failing and dejected Christian feels when he reads such a passage, recognises its deep and necessary truth yet recognises also that he is far behind many of his humanist friends in sheer simple decency and goodness.

The best way I know of levering myself out of this self-mocking dejection is to remember that the men and women I most love and admire have all travelled by this path. And I know that there is a further divine paradox — and one which Fénelon fully explores — the heavenly fact that this is not a path of misery but of joy; not of grinding introspection but of flowering in the sun of God's love. I know that the joy of the saints, whether canonised or not, is as far beyond a decent human contentment as the figure of St Francis shines above and beyond the honourable figure of John Stuart Mill. There is another History of Christianity as well as the one we always read — and that is the unwritable history of Christians, known and unknown, who went at least far enough on Fénelon's way to become true vehicles of God's love for man.

We know what terrible crimes have been committed in the name of our religion, but it is quite wrong to say, as some glib Christian apologists have a habit of saying, that Christianity has not failed because it has never been tried. It has succeeded because it *has* been tried — by St Paul and St Antony and St Columba; by St John of the Cross and St Theresa of Avila; by St Vincent de Paul and Jacob Boehme and Nicholas Ferrar; by George Fox and John Wesley; by Fénelon and Dostoevsky; by William Law and William Blake; by St Seraphim of Sartov and Edward King of Lincoln . . .

And as for this so-called "Post-Christian Age" of ours we have also had our encouragement of saintly Christian witness — from a Péguy and a Schweitzer; a Bonhoeffer and a Simone Weil; an Evelyn Underhill and a Mother Theresa; a John XXIII and a Danielo Dolci; a Huddlestone, a Don Camara, a Merton and a Steve Biko. They have shown us that *Liberty of the Sons of God* which St Paul looked for, and often found, in the earliest of all Christian communities. And this century has also had its Christian martyrs, quieter, humbler and more forgiving of their enemies than most of the martyrs who died so stridently under Diocletian.

So in the end, though it has served us well, we have to transcend our *Age of Analysis and Self-consciousness*. God is not to be analysed: Love is beyond dispute: Holiness means wholeness, and cannot be dissected or divided. After so many inadequate words the Christian's last word is simply "Yes!" Yes to love of God and man; through Jesus; in this place and in this time.

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