

JESUS' ATTITUDE TO RELIGION

By JOHN ASHTON

THINK NOT THAT I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them';¹ 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel';² 'Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?'³ So spoke Jesus, still clinging, it would appear, to the legal and cultic traditions of his ancestors and still dreaming the jewish dream of the conversion of the gentiles to the worship of Yahweh. In an article enquiring as this one does into Jesus' attitude towards the religious practices and beliefs of his own day,⁴ it is as well to make clear from the outset that the familiar picture of Jesus as a revolutionary teacher who went about deliberately overturning the rusting apple-carts of pharisaism is one-sided to the point of naivety. Indeed there is just as much truth, startling as it may appear at first glance, in Bultmann's picture of Jesus as a rabbi: 'If the gospel record is worthy of credence, it is at least clear that Jesus actually lived as a jewish rabbi'.⁵ According to this interpretation, it was only after Jesus' death that the religious revolution, fired by belief in the resurrection, really got under way.

¹ Mt 5, 17.

² Mt 15, 24.

³ Mk 11, 17.

⁴ Let me also point out that I am not concerned here with the *Church's* attitude to religion, nor with the way in which a new religion was evolved out of the old. This attitude, and the attitude of his followers after his death, cannot just be identified without more ado. It is no doubt consonant with much of the Church's teaching to believe that Jesus foresaw all the dogmatic developments that were to take place within the Church right up to the end of time. But if one does not attribute total prescience to the historical Jesus (and many theologians nowadays would argue that this conflicts with a proper understanding of the *kenosis*), then one has to ask just where the limits of his knowledge are to be placed. And the most reasonable answer to this question is that they should be placed wherever a careful study of the available evidence indicates. This article attempts just such an answer for one, relatively restricted, aspect of Jesus' teaching. The approach is historical rather than theological and I shall not be concerned with the transitional, post-easter period, in which Christ's words and deeds came to be interpreted in the light of his resurrection, and in which, through the guidance of his Spirit, new means were found of celebrating the different way in which he was now present to his followers.

⁵ Bultmann, R., *Jesus and the Word* (London and Glasgow, 1958), p 49.

As Bultmann observes elsewhere: 'Christian faith did not exist until there was a christian kerygma; a kerygma proclaiming Jesus Christ – specifically Jesus Christ the crucified and risen one – to be God's eschatological act of salvation'.¹

But what of Jesus himself? Was not the sermon on the mount the charter of a new religion? Did not Jesus proclaim a message of salvation for all mankind? Did not the sacrifice of the new covenant, inaugurated by Jesus at the last supper, render obsolete the festivals and sacrifices inseparably associated with the temple? There is no ready-made answer available to these questions, but the evidence of the gospel suggests that during his lifetime Jesus was first and foremost a *teacher*. His exorcisms and healing-miracles lent his message an authoritativeness enjoyed by none of his contemporaries, 'for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes'.² He was indeed a religious reformer, but initially at least he set out to insert his appeal within the context of an old and well-tryed system of practice and belief, not to establish a new one. The episode of the ejection of the money-changers from the temple affords a good illustration of his general attitude. This was a symbolic action in the direct tradition of Jeremy and Ezekiel, carried out vigorously and fearlessly and bearing a meaning that none could mistake. Like his predecessors, he reinforced the powerful symbolism of his actions with a personal commentary: 'And he taught, and said to them, Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a den of thieves'.³ To restore the ancient religion to its pristine splendour and so to attract the allegiance of all the nations of the world, this was Jesus' original aim. The clearing of the forecourt of the temple (the part reserved for gentiles) shows his acceptance of the old tradition that one day the gentiles would flock to Jerusalem and join in worshipping the one true God. Only gradually did he come to the bitter realization that the old bottles really were incapable of taking his new wine; yet his followers, for a long time after his death, continued to worship in the temple, and even St Paul, if we can trust the evidence of the Acts, always preached his message first of all the jews and only subsequently to others.

Is it to be concluded, then, that we owe all the most adventurous features of the new religion, its universalism, its anti-nomianism,

¹ Bultmann, R., *Theology of the New Testament* (London, 1965), Vol 1, p 3.

² Mk 1, 22.

³ Mk 11, 17 ff.

its emphasis upon a spiritual rather than an external cult, to the genius of St Paul? This extreme position has been maintained before now, but once again it is too simple to be true. I shall be arguing that the message of Jesus, though conceived in terms familiar to his contemporaries, really was too radical to be contained within the constricting formulae of the old religion, and that these had become too tight and rigid to allow complete expression to what was, after all, a revolutionary message. Within the pages of the gospels, sayings that appear to imply support and confirmation of the old law and the old ways of worship jostle against other sayings and parables that suggest total rejection. The early Form Critics solved this difficulty with brave sweeps of their newly-forged sword: for instance, they simply ascribed to the primitive christian community those parables that appear to display a generous universalism. But it is surely more likely that the initial impetus and inspiration came from Jesus himself.

Nevertheless, the problem remains: how was the impulse given and how was it felt? The first christians did not set out to change the teaching of Jesus. There is abundant evidence of the loyal reverence they felt for his words, and of their continuing eagerness to hand them down to others. According to St Luke (and it is significant that he should have seen nothing peculiar in this), St Paul was still 'preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ',¹ even while in prison. The kingdom of God, the central object of Jesus' message, had now become virtually synonymous with the message about him. There was a continuity here, and the evangelists insist upon it. But the nature of the continuity is not always easy to grasp, the fermentation of the new wine not always easy to detect and analyze.

Universalism

The process might be thought to be exhibited most clearly in the message of universalism. But in fact there is no general agreement among scholars about the extent to which Jesus himself set out to preach the coming of the kingdom beyond the frontiers of Palestine. At the time of his birth the not-too-distant persecutions of the seleucid monarchs, followed by the roman occupation, had led, as one might have expected, to an increasingly narrow form of nationalism, evidence for which is scattered throughout the gospels. Even the

¹ Acts 28, 31.

movement of proselytism within the hellenistic diaspora arose from a sense of the urgent need to defend the jewish faith and to commend it, paradoxically enough, not just to foreigners but to the jews themselves, isolated in the midst of an alien culture that threatened, as so often in the past, to corrupt the purity of the old religion or else to leave those who practised it doubtful and insecure.

The expulsion of the money-changers from the temple precincts symbolized, as we saw, the welcome Jesus was prepared to extend to the gentiles. They were to be admitted to the temple and allowed to worship there. But if Jesus' universalism stopped there, if he were simply prepared to let the gentiles in, there would still be no missionary activity in our sense. In fact Jesus did send out his disciples as missionaries. The concluding episode of St Matthew's gospel, in which Jesus orders the apostles to 'teach all nations', is no doubt an addition of the evangelist, but the earlier account of the sending of the seventy (or seventy-two) is surely authentic; and Luke is right to connect it with the threat to Chorazin and Bethsaida, coupled as this threat is with a tolerant promise to, of all places, Tyre and Sidon.¹ Many of Jesus' parables also, particularly that of the great banquet,² exhibit a fine egalitarianism.

But in the last analysis it is less Jesus' personal universalism than the nature and quality of his teaching which broke the constricting bonds of jewish nationalism. Had his teaching been simply a call to repentance, an effort to rekindle the devotion of his fellow-jews and to get them to observe the old laws in all their rigour and purity, the pharisees would have welcomed him as an ally and he might have found himself the leader of a small and esoteric fellowship not unlike the community of 'monks' of Qumran. When he began to preach his message was not very different from that of John the Baptist: 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand'. And though he was aware that the kingdom of God was encountered first and foremost in his own person, he might still have been content to preach it exclusively to the jews (always provided that they had been prepared to listen). But the radical nature of his appeal, the new relationship with God that he proposed, was inconsistent with a narrow nationalism. Stories such as those which concern the centurion or the syro-phoenician woman suggest that even if he did not make it his aim to spread his message among the gentiles, nevertheless, when they did beseech his aid, the acid test he applied

¹ Cf Lk 10.

² Lk 14, 16-24.

was the same as for his fellow-countrymen: did they have faith? Looking back on these stories we can see the universalistic implications of the demand for faith. But the stories themselves preclude any conscious and deliberate universalism on Jesus' part. It is not here, at any rate, but in the nature of the faith he demanded that his teaching was revolutionary in content and effect.

The Cult

Cult and ritual are central features of all religions, and the Jewish religion in particular allows full scope for the human instinct to worship. In this vital area the actual differences between Judaism and Christianity are immense. Yet Jesus himself was a practising Jew from the day of his circumcision to the day before his death. He conscientiously observed the feasts of the Jewish calendar and respected the precepts governing divine worship. To think of him as a religious reformer in the sense, say, that Luther was, the champion and leader of a complete break-away, would be to misunderstand him totally. He might well have criticised the sale of indulgences or castigated a magical attitude to the sacraments, but he would, one feels, have left the rites themselves intact. He was less interested in *how* men acknowledged the sovereignty of God than in the quality of their submission.

The fact is that the New Testament itself offers no new rites in the technical sense: where it speaks of religion and the cult it is either in implicit acceptance of Jewish practice or else, as in the epistle to the Hebrews, to reject the whole cult as totally superseded by the single sacrifice of Christ. Baptism and the Eucharist are apparent exceptions, yet the rite of baptism is not specifically Christian, and it is doubtful if the Eucharist, initially at any rate, was felt to be a rite at all. Jesus' desire to be remembered in a communal meal is not in itself proof that he wished to set up a *ritual* commemoration, and the narratives of the appearances of the risen Jesus in particular point to a much simpler kind of reminiscence. When St Paul speaks of the Christian sacrifice it is in the metaphorical sense we have grown used to: 'I appeal to you . . . to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship'.¹ He thinks of himself as fulfilling a priestly function, but his ministry consists entirely of the service of the Gospel of God.² When James speaks of the religious cult it is to define it in terms

¹ Rom 12, 1.

² Rom 15, 6; cf Phil 2, 17.

of fidelity to God and practical charity: 'to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world'.¹ Jesus' words to the samaritan woman are a further puzzle: 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth'.² It may be that this expression is not meant to *exclude* ritual as we understand it, but there is certainly no specific mention of ritual, and the thrust of the saying is in the opposite direction.

When the reformers first began to argue from such texts as these, the Church was too weak, too much on the defensive, to give them a serious hearing. And the problems raised are grave ones, reaching to the very core of religious practice and belief. But it may be that the sacramental system upon which the whole of the Church's liturgy is constructed is not inseparably bound up with any particular form of ritual. What counts is that the living relationship with the Father established by Christ should be expressed in a way that the christian community finds meaningful and helpful. Everyone agrees that rubrics are subject to alteration, but perhaps we have yet to discover just how much of the liturgy is really composed of dispensable rubrics. There is at least one sacrament, marriage, whose essential *ritual* expression is reduced to a bare 'I will'.

However this may be, the fact remains that Jesus himself evinced no interest in altering the traditional jewish forms of worship, and that it was not he but his followers who eventually forsook the synagogues. The fact that they continued for quite a time to frequent the synagogues whilst celebrating their christian *agape* elsewhere, in one another's houses, is sufficient indication that they did not regard the christian memorial meal as replacing the traditional forms of worship. As for Jesus himself, even at his most critical he showed himself quite happy with the old rites, provided that they were performed in the proper spirit. The gift was to be left before the altar as long as there was an offence to be forgiven, but the would-be worshipper, after reconciling himself to his brother, was to return and offer his gift.³ And those who were prepared to invoke the temple in support of a false oath were curtly reminded that the temple was holier than the gold it contained.⁴

But in judaism ritual observance was not confined to worship: it extended to every aspect of human behaviour. Primitive religions are, of course, characterized by certain taboos, which mark out the sacred from the profane and give a religious colouring to all the

¹ Jas 1, 27.

² Jn 4, 24.

³ Mt 5, 23 ff.

⁴ Mt 23, 16 ff.

most important activities of both individual and tribe. But there are two respects in which judaism had altered and adapted these primitive taboos. First, it had enormously expanded their scope, thus allowing them to penetrate into the innermost recesses of civilized life. And even a comparatively simple civilization like that developed by Israel was infinitely more complex and intricate than the simple cultures of primitive man. Secondly, and more importantly, judaism saw in its inherited taboos one expression of the revealed will of God.

In this context judaism is synonymous with pharisaism, not in the popular sense of hypocrisy or sham, but in the technical sense of a belief that religion covers the whole of life and that religion is expressible in terms of law. Jesus agreed with the pharisees that religion (a relationship with God established by man's acceptance of God's revelation by faith) covers the whole of life. He did not agree that religion is expressible in terms of law; his fierce controversies with the pharisees turned upon this point, and it is here, not in any direct attempt to replace the cult or to preach the message of salvation to the gentiles, that the origins of his religious revolution are to be sought.

The Law

The role of law in the jewish religion had always been important. There are at least three different law-codes in the Pentateuch itself. But when it was first composed, the bible was primarily the record of God's dealings with his chosen people: only later, under judaism, did the emphasis shift onto the legal parts of the bible, so that it came to be thought of first and foremost as a book of divine law. Judaism as we know it began after the return from the babylonian exile. The prophet Haggai gives us an example of the sort of casuistry that was practised at the end of the sixth century:

Ask the priests to decide the question, 'If one carries holy flesh in the skirt of his garment and touches with his skirt bread or pottage or wine or oil, or any kind of food, does it become holy?' The priests answered, 'No!' Then said Haggai, 'If one who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?' The priests answered, 'It does become unclean'.¹

The authority of the laws resided, not in any intrinsic intelligibility, but in scripture, the revealed word of God. But since no corpus

¹ Hag 2, 11-13.

of law can cover every possible case that might arise, there must be interpreters to solve disputed cases. In the first place this job was done by the priests, as we learn from Haggai, later by the scribes and rabbis. But it was the pharisees who first sponsored the all-embracing legal system that we associate with later judaism.

The sheer audacity of the attempt to delineate the will of God in all conceivable circumstances takes one's breath away; and there is certainly something grand and awe-inspiring about the Mishnah. However, the christian can scarcely view it without remembering how the whole vast structure was undermined, even as its foundations were being laid, by the words of Jesus. One example, perhaps the most central and illuminating of all, must suffice:

For the pharisees, and all the jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.¹

So Mark, for the sake of his non-jewish readers, briefly sketches in the background of one of Jesus' best known sayings: 'Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him'.² With these words Jesus sets the axe to the root, not merely of pharisaism, but of any religious observance based upon a distinction between the sacred and the profane. 'Thus he declared all foods clean', comments the evangelist, a little further on;³ and the comment is a just one. Jesus is denying that there are any external or material circumstances which can separate us from God; we can cut ourselves off from God only by our own attitude and behaviour. 'This', observes Professor Norman Perrin, 'is perhaps the most radical statement in the whole of the Jesus tradition':⁴ and he points out how perfectly it accords with Jesus' own attitude towards tax collectors and sinners, who have cut themselves off from the law, but may still be open to the love of God.

How widely Jesus' approach diverges from the orthodox rabbinical tradition may be seen from a saying attributed to a rabbi who lived at a time when the original taboos attaching to the laws of

¹ Mk 7, 3-4.

² Mk 7, 15.

³ Mk 7, 19.

⁴ Perrin, N., *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London, 1968), p 150.

ritual purification had long lost whatever importance they may still have held in the first century: 'Death does not make unclean, nor water clean. But the holy One has said, I have established a law, have fixed a decree; you are not to transgress my decree, which is written; this is the distinguishing mark of my law'. The religious spirit underlying and supporting a declaration of this sort was powerful and unworried. The law was felt, not as an imposition, but as a liberation, as we can see from psalm 119 (118), a long and joyous meditation upon God's commandments. Armed with these detailed prescriptions, a man could know the will of God for him at every waking moment, and though even the just man could not expect to fulfil all the commandments ('the just man sins seven times a day'), still he could hope to perform enough of them to make his day generally pleasing to God.

And this was the whole purpose of pharisaism: 'For the pharisee', remarks W. D. Davies, in a brief but not unsympathetic examination of the whole movement, 'it was possible by the examination, exposition and adaptation of the text of the law to find what was the right conduct and to prescribe it for every circumstance in life. This seems to have been the pharisaic ideal, the creation of a community governed by a code which provided a detailed chart which could be variously applied'.¹ And if this reminds us of certain features of catholic moral theology text-books, or even of religious rules, this is no doubt because, as Davies points out, the spirit of pharisaism that persisted in later judaism 'has been felt outside official judaism again and again'.² And indeed in every christian there is something of the pharisee and something of the pagan. None of us is totally converted; if we are to listen to the voice of the Spirit and avoid relapsing into the extremes of legalism and magic which, from a religious point of view, represent the opposing temptations of pharisaism and paganism, we require fidelity and discernment.

Conclusion

No rabbi laid greater stress than Jesus upon man's duty of absolute submission to the will of God. But Jesus, unlike the rabbis, felt that this fundamental duty of obedience could never be circumscribed by law. His demands were summed up in the word 'faith', which meant abandonment to divine providence, total surrender.

¹ Davies, W. D., *Introduction to Pharisaism* (Philadelphia, 1967), p 25.

² *Ibid.*, p 26.

But this is not all. Jesus' central conviction was that in his person men encountered God; his coming inaugurated the kingdom of God, his preaching fulfilled the promises of the prophets. Just how his demand of conversion, for a radical and irrevocable turning to God, was related in his mind to his own person is hard to say, and would require at least another long article to elucidate; but *that* it was so related seems clear. And in this way there was a direct continuity between his teaching and that of his followers, a natural sequence between the gospel he proclaimed and gospel he was.

The ultimate difference between christianity and judaism is that for the latter revelation is embodied in a *law*, for the former in a *person*. For the pharisee the will of God is expressed in the book of the law, delivered to Moses on mount Sinai and interpreted by tradition; for the christian the will of God is expressed in the person of Jesus, delivered to death on a cross, but still present, through the power of the resurrection, in the scriptures, the sacraments, and in the people who together make up the Church of God. Since his presence is essentially spiritual – he is in fact present through his Spirit, not otherwise – it can never be pinned to rites and precepts, however traditional and however hallowed. Certainly the holy Spirit is conveyed through the medium of ritual, and the Church is empowered to speak in Christ's name. To deny this is to fall into the error of extreme protestantism, which refuses more than a token presence to Christ in the sacraments and rejects the authority of the hierarchical Church altogether. But rites and precepts are subject to alteration; none can claim *absolute* validity. Obedience to a precept is the jewish road to salvation: and for those who really find the will of God expressed in the letter of the law this is a sublime ideal – but it is not christianity. The meticulous execution of a rite is a characteristic of pagan, primitive religions; and where the rite is the celebration and effectuation of a true relationship with God or the cosmos it demands our respect and even our reverence – but it is not christianity. This is not to say that the christian should ignore precepts or neglect ritual. There are many sayings of Jesus that prove his readiness to comply with the precepts and observe the rites of his own age. But they were not the object of his ultimate concern. And we too, when we have performed all of these things, can only say: 'We are unprofitable servants, we have done that which it was our duty to do'.¹

¹ Lk 17, 10.