

THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE

BY

COLUMBA CARY ELWES, O.S.B.

I—THE WAY

IS it fanciful to see in these three titles combined the summing up of past history, the salving and transforming of the ancient glimpses of Truth? It may be fanciful, but it has an aptness suitable for our purposes. And even if more symbolic than real, the titles apart, Christ did in his Person and teaching sum up the past, even the pagan past.

The world in ancient times seems, speaking broadly, to have been four parted: the Greek world fumbling for truth, the East finding a path to tread, a Way, and the rest seeking survival, the mystery religions; then, quite apart, the little people of the Jews.

Christ called himself the Way. The Buddhists and the Confucianists were seeking ways to peace of mind; the first by progressive annihilation of the all or by one's absorption in the All, the beyond-nothing; the second by a concentration on manners, on social peace.

These Eastern religions or philosophies were concerned with the art of living. They each seem to have begun through the agony of soul rising from intense suffering.¹ The Buddha lived in a time of great trouble, his own native town was burnt to the ground. Confucius lived in a world of harsh struggles for mastery between powerful states; their answers were different.

The first was an escape, a withdrawal from the struggle, and in a sense an etherialisation by a clear admission of the futility of mundane things. But it was more, it was a gesture of despair². Christ gave the answer to that cry of despair. True, the world was futile in its values; true, life has many continuous sorrows. But life can be used as expiation, so can sorrow, and even death. The Cross was the answer to the Buddha, Christ's brave progress, open-eyed, up to Jerusalem, to accept what had been prophesied in Isaias, there was the answer

¹ Much here is derived from Professor A. J. Toynbee's *Study of History*.

² The Mahayana Buddhist theory of Incarnation is touched upon in the Title '*Caritas ad finem*'.

to Sakiamuni. Physical suffering, mental suffering, were in a lower order to charity and faith, they were unintelligible by themselves; but as manifestations of the wrath of God, and as grist for the mill of redemption, they were, and are, very precious. Buddha who had diagnosed the disease, who had perhaps analysed the cause—original and actual sin—did not find a remedy. How could he?—it was God's secret. Christ explained the cause in the light of the Old Testament, and himself was the solution, by using suffering as trials of strength in Charity. Consequently we are not to turn away from the world despairingly, and seek our extinction, but we are to use the world, use our life, the first with caution, the second with confidence because of Christ's transforming of it through his grace.

II—THE LIFE

The root of the mystery religions was perhaps the desire of survival after death, the prolongation of existence, the fear of extinction. Even Buddhism, in what it inherited from Brahminism had this longing for immortality. Metempsychosis is an effort to bridge the chasm of oblivion. Those early forms of mystery religion connected with fertility and the ever recurring, ever wonderful resurrection of nature, are an attempt to link up humanity with their cycle of ever-living.

There is some beauty in this ancient idea. Nature is personified and turned into a god, and man is then linked with the god. The resurrection of these gods, sometimes compared with the resurrection of Christ, were however for a different reason. In the case of our Lord, an historical person, he came to life, not as a myth or fairy story with a point, but to prove that what he said was true; for God would not allow such a manifestation of superhuman power except to his envoy. In the case of these gods, the rising from the dead is merely a myth, a personification of the forces of nature, nature which does yearly seem to come to life once more. In the case of Christ, the dying was also expiatory, in their case not at all. Lastly the life that these mysteries provided was the same life; it was survival, not the life of grace such as Christ gives on a new plane and in a God-like manner.

Yet in a sense Christ was heir to all the good in that. These myths and rites did prepare the minds of those that heard the voice

of a Saint Paul. Nor was he unconscious of the background of their thoughts. Even Christ seems on one occasion to have used the terminology of this myth to bring home a point, the point: a new life.

Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die itself remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world keepeth it unto life everlasting. (John 12, 23).

Here we have the comparison between recurring life in nature and the two lives in man: this and the next.

It is hard for us, brought up in generations of christianity, to realise the anguish of those who were uncertain of a future life, who had only desire but no proof positive. The cry of St Paul gives us the true perspective.

Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? (Cor. 15).

This comes at the end of a strange argument, intelligible only in the light of the 'mysteries' which in this way St Paul transcends and destroys as the shadow is destroyed when the light appears immediate and unimpeded.

Firstly St Paul affirms that plants rise again; secondly this is an 'earnest' or a symbol that we too shall 'rise again'.

Senseless man, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die first. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not the body that shall be; but bare grain, as of wheat, or of some of the rest. (1 Cor. 15, 36-7).

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption, it shall rise in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour, it shall rise in glory. It is sown in weakness, it shall rise a spiritual body. (ibid. 42-44).

Here already we have this transfiguration of the myth and of the idea of life. This is no longer 'survival', but a higher perfection, a changed thing. And he explains that this new life, by which we become immortal, is Christ's.

If there be a natural body there is also a spiritual body as it is written: "The first man Adam was made into a living soul: the last Adam into a quickening spirit. Yet that was not first which was spiritual but that which is natural; afterwards that which is spiritual. The first man was of the earth earthly; the second man from heaven, heavenly. Therefore as we have borne the image

of the earthly, let us bear also the image of the heavenly. (ibid. 44-9).

Thus did Christ fulfil and more the vague longings for immortality in the pagan world, enshrined in rites now dark now clear. This hope of life in Christ was guaranteed by his resurrection. So is our hope not vain.

III—THE TRUTH

The ancient world was not only filled with folk searching for survival or men fleeing from the pain of this world; there were other minds intent upon truth. In the west there were the philosophers of Greece and in the East especially those of China. St Augustine has summed up the relation between Christ and the Platonists in a famous passage in the *Confessions*:

And thou, wishing to show me first how 'thou resisteth the proud but giveth grace unto the humble', and by how great an act of thy mercy thou hadst traced out for men the way of humility in that thy Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst men, thou didst procure for me. . . . certain books of the Platonists. And therein I read, not indeed in the very words, but to the very same purpose, enforced by many and divers reasons, that 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God; the same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was made nothing: that which was made by Him is life, and the life was the light of men, and the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not'. And that the soul of man though 'it bear witness to the light', yet itself 'is not that light'; but the Word of God, being God, 'is that true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world'. And that 'he was in the world and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not'. *But* that 'he came unto his own, and his own received him not; but as many as received him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God, as many as believed in his name'; this I read not there.

Again I read there that 'God the Word was born not of flesh, nor of blood, nor of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God', but that 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us', I read not there. For I traced in those books, that it was in

many and divers ways said that 'the Son was in the form of the Father, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God', for that naturally he was the self-same Substance. But that: 'He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of man, and found in fashion as a man, humbled himself, and became obedient unto death and that the death of the Cross; wherefore God exalted him from the dead and gave him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father' those books have not. (Book 7 *ad finem*).

Likewise the East had searched into the nature of God, particularly the Taoists, nor had they failed to find.³ The Lao-tzu has some Dionysian thoughts of the first cause of all things, called, though essentially nameless 'Tao'. So also has the *Han-fei-tzu*:

Tao is that whereby all things are so, and with which all principles agree. . . . Tao is that whereby all things become complete. (c. 20).

There is a thing, formless yet complete. Before heaven and Earth it existed. Without sound, without substance, it stands alone without changing. It is all prevailing and unfailing. One may think of it as the Mother of all beneath Heaven. We do not know its name, but we term it Tao. Forced to give an appellation to it I shall call it Great.

The Lao-tzu goes on:

Tao as a thing is impalpable, incommensurable. Incommensurable, impalpable, yet latent in it are forms. Impalpable and incommensurable, yet within it there is an essence. This essence is extremely pure, but none the less efficacious. (c. 2).

Tao is eternally nameless (c. 32).

And that is all. It is all that philosophy can give: the namelessness of God, the beyond-beingness of God; the darkness; the cloud. All the mystics have reached there; all alike are blind before the absolute. We know that he is the creator, the upholder.

O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways. For who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and recompense shall be made to him?

³ Cf. *Chinese Philosophy*, by Fung Yu Lang.

For of him, and by him, and in him, are all things: to him be glory for ever. Amen. (Rom. 11, 33).

All these speak much the same language. But in the Christian philosophy or way of life, or Truth, there is another dynamic element, that God is love, that he so loved the world as to send his own Son; that, in order that we poor mortals should not be in any doubt, the Son of God even died, and not only died but was tortured on the Cross in his effort to help us and save us; and greater love than this can no man have than to give his life, his all. It is this dynamic Truth that God is love which has revolutionised the world, it has bridged the gulf between us and the Tao, the Creator, that remote being. It has shown that God too is a person and not just some thing. It might have been possible to reach such a conclusion by mere thought. If we have love, and love is good, then God the source of all good must too be love; if personality is good and all comes from God, then he too in an eminent way must also be a Person. In fact this was not discovered effectively, and we know that the design of God in the coming of Christ was a way suited to all, to the great and the small, in fact a way to humble us as children; for such we are.

Let us end with the words of a great modern Chinese thinker and lawyer, Dr John C. H. Wu. Comparing St Teresa of Lisieux's phrase 'It is Jesus who does all, and I . . . I do nothing' with Taoistic thought, he says:

I suppose that Lao Tzu would have said; 'It is the Tao (the Word) that does all, and I . . . I do nothing'. But the Tao is such an impersonal entity that it appears to me to be of the ice, icy; whereas Jesus is such a living flame of love that He enkindles every fibre of my heart. To me as a Chinese, the great thing about Christianity is that it combines the profound mysticism of Lao Tzu with the intense humanism of Confucius. It differs from Taoism in that the Tao or Word has taken on flesh and a warm pulsating heart. It differs from Confucianism in that it is the Word, and nothing short of the Word, that has done so. Confucius said 'One who has given offence to God prays in vain'. Lao Tzu said 'Why did the ancients prize the Tao? Is it not because, through it, whoever asks, finds, and whoever is guilty is relieved of punishment?' The Confucian idea of God is personal but narrow, while the Taoist idea is broad but impersonal. In my humble opinion God is more than a Person, and for that very

reason he is capable of assuming a Personality. Those who think otherwise seem to place themselves above God. They presume that they alone can possess personalities, but not God. Only Christianity can satisfy my mind completely, because its idea of God is at once broad and personal. And it is Therese who has confirmed my faith in my religion, for her mind is as subtle and detached as that of Lao Tzu while her heart is as affectionate as that of Confucius. (*The Science of Love*, by J. Wu. C.T.S.I.).



AN ADVENTUROUS FAMILY

BY

FERDINAND VALENTINE, O.P.



THE English Society of the Grail is a secular institute, autonomous and ecclesiastically approved, with its own rules and constitution. Its members are not religious, but laywomen who wish to dedicate their whole lives to work for Christ in the lay apostolate. Those who come to the Society come to an adventurous family.

Any girl can join the Society if she is willing to give herself to Christ to do anything, anywhere and at any time. There is room in the Society for girls of every social level and of every occupation, for anyone who wants to throw in her lot for life with a society of pioneers and who is prepared to accept the discipline of that Society. For lay institutes must be disciplined and their members be bound together with bonds of steel.

The lay apostolate cannot be driven by any mere transitory enthusiasm—indeed there is a distinct danger for women in any violent and undisciplined enthusiasm and if this is the driving power of an organisation then the life of an apostle cannot last longer than a few years. Exuberance and keenness, if they are not aided by the life of the spirit, tend to disintegrate the life of the apostle and to introduce a deep sense of frustration into her work. Everyone in the lay apostolate must have roots in Christ.