

THE TAPESTRY OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

"Contextualization" is one of those big words that most Christians think represents a good thing, even though they may be a bit unclear as to what it actually means. As a concept, contextualization is on the one hand quite simple and

straightforward. However, its wider connections and ramifications—both practical and theoretical—are truly complex. The term itself has an interesting background, and unraveling its usage will help us pinpoint some of the nuances of this absolutely crucial missiological reality.

The Term

In North American English, the suffix “-ization” indicates an act, process, or result of making or doing something; compare such familiar terms as “privatization,” “realization,” and “legalization.” Insofar as contextualization is used in reference to the Christian faith, the term therefore means Christianity becoming “contextual,” or appropriate and fitting to its various settings. All such settings for the Christian faith—including downtown Los Angeles, southern Sudan, and Brazilian footballers—have their own particular characteristics, so an almost equivalent term would be “particularization.” Put simply, then, contextualization refers to the “particularization(s)” of the universal Christian faith into individual contexts or settings.

So far, so good. Note again that contextualization is an act, process, or result. For clarity’s sake, for now at least, let’s think of it as a process. To be sure, there are various parties engaged in the act of contextualization; we will come back to that later. One can also point to resulting contextualizations of the Christian faith, although such results are never final because of the dynamic character of the parties and contexts involved. It is better to think of such resulting contextualizations (or “expressions”) of Christianity as snapshots of an ongoing process, whether it be Christian marriage in 21st-century America, articulations of the trinity in the ancient church creeds, worship in the late-19th-century Pacific Islands, 1980s leadership styles in Korean Presbyterian churches, or the churches’ relationships with the state in contemporary Uganda.

As an actual word and focal point of discussion, “contextualization” was coined in the early 1970s. At the time, the term was intended to draw attention to the socio-politico-economic aspects of any situation or context in which the gospel was at work. This was due to the fact that during the 1960s the collective worldwide Church, and missiologists in particular, had become enamored with “indigenization” and its more narrow anthropological focus on such cultural realities as language and traditional customs. Evangelicals, who moved toward consolidating their worldwide identity at Lausanne in 1974, already had concerns about the growing influence of liberation theology and its emphasis on salvation in political and economic terms. Even so, prominent Third World evangelicals from Latin America, Africa, and Asia pointed out the full scope of the Christian gospel, so most evangelicals have now accepted to one degree or another the need for the Christian faith in its entirety to be expressed in ways appropriate to each particular overall context.

The Agents

How one understands the process of contextualization depends in large part on who the primary agents of contextualization are understood to be, a factor noted earlier. One powerful North American evangelical instinct points to the expatriate (subconsciously assumed to be North American) missionary as the one primarily responsible to make the necessary adjustments to the form of the unchanging Christian message he or she brings, as well as to the resulting believers’ lives and practices. After all, this instinct claims, compared to the receivers—who almost always are from non-Christian backgrounds—it is the missionary who not only knows the Bible but also comes from a culture with a Christian heritage. By this scheme, the task of contextualization is daunting to be sure: the missionary has to communicate biblical truths given in ancient cultural forms to a totally different and non-Christian culture, all the while having to resist the temptation to import his or her own, altogether different, cultural norms. Those in the

receiving culture help the missionary learn their culture, and God somehow superintends the process, but the idea is that the expatriate Christian emissaries are primarily responsible for contextualizing the faith.

There are at least three reasons, however, why this instinct needs correction. First, it is out of date. That fact alone does not invalidate the concept, but viewing the expatriate missionary as primary is continuous with the pre-World War II image of how missions proceeded from "the West to the rest." Second, and speaking directly to the matter, God and the receiving agents are primary, not the expatriate emissary. The missionary (of whatever cultural background) is essential to bringing the gospel to those settings that have not yet heard it. However, what is of basic importance is God's initiative in communicating to people in their own languages and contexts. He speaks, and people hear in their heart languages, and it is the dynamic communication process—contextualization—that occurs between God and indigenous people that is primary. That critical God-indigenous people dynamic makes the missionary more like a third-party catalyst. Third, placing the missionary at the center of the contextualizing process tends to downplay the contextualized, particular character of the Christianity that he or she embodies and represents. The truth is that all expressions of the Christian faith bear the marks of their contexts. Moreover, no Christians embody the final and universal form of the faith, nor do any of us enjoy a vantage point outside of contextual realities that can dictate to others what is complete and normative.

Translatability

Some evangelicals will start to feel a bit queasy at this juncture, so at this tricky point we need to consider Christianity's basic trait of cultural and contextual translatability. God as Creator is wholly separate from His creation: He is transcendent. Yet God has remained involved with His fallen creation, preeminently through entering the world as a concrete man, becoming particularized or contextualized as Jesus of Nazareth. At the same time, God's Word, which centers and focuses on Jesus, speaks to all people in their particular languages as the Bible is (re-)translated again and again into new (and changing) languages. Jesus, thus, comes close to all kinds of people, to every tribe, tongue, and nation. He is not a provincial or tribal Savior, but He is the covenant Lord and Redeemer of all the earth. Together with His translated Word, Jesus crosses over cultural and generational boundaries and enters new contexts, shouldering His way into the beliefs of all kinds of people. Unlike Islam, for example, which brings into alien settings an enduring Arabic Qur'an and foundation of life, Jesus and His Word are translated into ever new settings, whereby people come to worship and follow Him within the terms and contours of their own languages and contexts.

Putting this translation process in a more explicitly theological way, the triune God speaks to particular people in their own mother tongues by His Word and Spirit, as well as through His emissaries. Because this God speaks in people's particular languages—whether English, Hebrew, Greek, Swahili, or any other human language—He shows Himself to be their/our God as well as the God of all peoples, not some foreign tribal deity. He transforms peoples and their settings from the inside out, so to speak. To put it from a Christian perspective spoken within any particular linguistic and cultural context, since this God speaks our language and knows us intimately, He knows our past, pre-Christian heritage as well. We, and all other peoples, have always been responsible to this Creator, Covenant Lord. Our sin has been blinding us, the evil one has been deceiving us, but God has been wooing us to grope for Him and His truth. Now that He has brought or translated the good news of Jesus into our context, He is guiding the whole contextualizing process in which He grants faith and growth, shaping our understanding of the Christian faith and reforming our lives into Christlikeness.

Inherent to this translatability of God's living and written Word is a tension between the universality and particularity, or "contextuality," of the Christian faith. On the one hand there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism for Christianity. It is the same God who is the God of all His people around the world and down through the centuries. In tension, however, with this universalizing side of Christianity is the homing drive of the faith, the push toward being our faith in our God in our particular language within our setting. God's universality and transcendence help protect such a homing instinct from overly domesticating (yet another almost equivalent term for "contextualizing") the faith into a syncretistic alliance with local particularities to a point of rendering Christian distinctives unrecognizable. In that sense, the Christian faith should always have a pilgrim character to it, such that it maintains a measure of counter-cultural teaching and practice. On the other hand, God's immanence in particular contexts—supremely exemplified in the Incarnation—helps protect the inherent transcultural, universal side of the Christian faith from making it foreign and irrelevant to, or quarantined away from, any facet of any particular context. This need for relevance and applicability is why contextualization is such an absolutely crucial missiological reality, as stated at the outset. A healthy contextualization cultivates a prophetic involvement of God's people within their particular contexts, avoiding the twin extremes of irrelevant quarantine and syncretistic localization. 3

Redemption Applied

It is important to note as well that this universal-particular, transculturalization-contextualization dynamic is not something just for settings where Christianity is relatively new. For an English-speaking, early 21st-century, North American context, that means that the "missiological" reality of contextualization is always taking place here as well, not just on the (foreign) field. Whereas pioneer, unreached sectors of the world's peoples have their own unique place in what "missions" involves, insofar as God's world mission is intent on comprehensively redeeming all of the earth, the "mission field" is still everywhere, including here. Full redemption of any and all contexts will only come at the eschaton, so contextualization will continue to be an ongoing reality in whatever setting the Lord's people find themselves.

Full redemption of the entire world and its particular contexts—worked out in ongoing processes of contextualization—involves a spectrum of dimensions of belief and practice: worldview, cognition, linguistic forms, behavior, communication, social structure, and decision-making processes.4 How the Christian faith looks in each of these interrelated dimensions will of course vary from context to context—although the variance will not go beyond recognition of a common Christian identity. Thus, for example, a Christian worldview will include, among other marks, God as Creator, the ultimate place of Jesus of Nazareth, and the central role in the world of the Holy Spirit. It becomes problematic, however, to speak of the Christian worldview, since worldviews are always to be found among particular Christians in particular contexts—including biblical worldviews. The same universal-particular dynamic is true of other dimensions of faith and practice as well. Thus, while Christian decision-making is to exemplify Spirit-led mutual submission, to speak of the Christian decision-making process moves into the danger area of making universally normative a particular, contextual reality.

A Closing Image

The manifestations of God's redemption throughout the earth and world history are like countless braids interwoven in one grand tapestry. Each braid in turn has three strands: sanctification of God's people wrought by the Holy Spirit, the corresponding discipleship of God's people as they follow Jesus' example and teachings, and the contextualization of the covenant community's sanctified obedience in particular situations. The strands must not be unraveled away from each other, lest the entire tapestry become skewed and unbalanced. God is ever working

among His people throughout the entire earth. How we concretely and contextually manifest our obedience to His gracious covenantal dealings with us is part of the worldwide venture of faith, guided by His Word and Spirit.

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[1] Andrew Walls has pioneered much of current thinking and research into the translatability of the Christian faith, e.g., in his *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996).

[2] Kwame Bediako has explored this transforming and interpretative role of mother-tongue Scripture within each cultural context in, for example, "Gospel and Culture: Guest Editorial," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 2, 2 (December, 1999): 1.

[3] I have borrowed this scheme from Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989, pp.39-46).

[4] David Hesselgrave, "Contextualization that is Authentic and Relevant," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 12, 3 (July-Sept., 1995): 116ff.

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GET INVOLVED

- SERVE
- LEARN MORE
- PRAY

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE
OFFICER
Longer
MORE

SYSTEMS ADMINISTRATOR
Longer
MORE

SUMMER MINIST
THE PRESBYTERIAN
MEDICAL CL
Summer Intern
MORE

Part 3: Gospel Contextualization

Adapted from Chapters 7 to 10 of Center Church
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(Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2012))

Introduction

Have you ever sat through a sermon that was biblically sound – yet so boring that it made you want to cry? More often a boring sermon is doctrinally sound but utterly irrelevant. The listener thinks, “You’ve shown me something that may be true, but in any case, I don’t care. I don’t see how it would actually change how I think, feel and act.”

A boring sermon is boring because it does not connect biblical truth to the hopes, narratives, fears and errors of people in that particular culture, time and place. Contextualization means **translating** and **adapting** the communication and the ministry of the gospel **to a particular culture, without compromising** the essence and particulars of the gospel itself. In this section, we will look at the biblical foundations for balanced contextualization and examine how we can contextualize the gospel in our communication to the culture in a way that is both respectful and challenging.

I. Intentional Contextualization

Missionary G. Linwood Barney speaks of culture as resembling an onion. The inmost core is the community’s worldview, then its values, then its set of human institutions and finally the most observable part of culture is human customs behaviour, material products etc.

1. Danger of contextualization: The danger of contextualization is overadapting to culture. Every culture will find some parts of Scripture more attractive and other parts more offensive. It will be natural, then, for those in that culture to consider the inoffensive parts more “important” and “essential” than the offensive parts.

- *Syncretism* is a rejection of the full authority of the Bible, a picking among its various teachings to create a Christianity that does not confront it.
- There is no one, single way to express the gospel that is universal for everyone in all cultures. However, there is nonetheless only one true gospel.
- This means that contextualizing the gospel is **inevitable**, as soon as you express it in language, deal with time, speak in metaphors and illustrations or appeal to reason and logic.

2. Danger of not contextualizing: The danger of NOT contextualizing the gospel to a particular culture is, ironically, that we will unconsciously be deeply contextualized to our own culture. So it is important to do contextualization **consciously**. Everyone contextualizes—but few think much about how they are doing it. In one fatal example, Malcolm Gladwell, in his book entitled *The Outliers* describes the concept of power distance. Some cultures—such as Korea—give much greater deference to authority figures than other cultures. He cites instances of airline crashes attributed to the co-pilot dropping hints instead of directly telling the pilot they were facing an emergency situation. When this culture-related communication issue was recognized, airlines have started training air cabin crew how to communicate in a more culturally neutral, direct way. How much more so do ministers of the gospel need to understand their own cultural communication style, as well as that of their target culture.

One of the basic mistakes one could make is to elevate the “traditions of men” to the same level as “biblical truth” and require them to be reproduced elsewhere, which produces a distorted Christian living or ministry. For example, Asian cultures may unconsciously stress duty and filial piety such that they cannot stand up against parental opposition, whereas Western cultures may be so influenced by individualism that they tend to church hop and be non-committal about church membership. We must consider how we are products of our culture, in order to contextualize the gospel message to other cultures.

II. Balanced Contextualization

1. The idea of the “two way” bridge

In *Between Two Worlds*, John Stott likens Christian communication to building a bridge from Scripture to the contemporary world. Contextualization is bringing Biblical doctrine “over the bridge” and re-expressing it in terms that are coherent to a particular culture. This does not mean simply bringing a Biblical doctrine over the bridge into the new culture. We cannot assume that we who are on one side of the bridge already have an undistorted grasp of the gospel. Our message to the new culture will be ineffective if we don’t **allow two-way traffic**. We need not. When we interact with people from other cultures and social settings, we find our particular distortions being challenged. Then we go back to the Bible and ask if we got it right before. One of the main ways our understanding of the Bible remains distorted is through what has been called “the Canon within the Canon.” We treat some parts of the Bible as more important and ignore or discard parts of it. For example, Westerners tend to ignore texts in the Bible about the authority of civil magistrates, parents, elders and ministers (Romans 13, Hebrews 13:17) because their culture is suspicious of institutions and authority. At the same time, they can point to passages warning leaders about “lording it over” others (Matthew 20:24-28 and 1 Peter 5:1-4). Asians on the other hand may take those text seriously, but ignore or miss texts that talk about the importance

of the individual (Philemon), personal conscience (1 Timothy 1:5, 3:9), and personal responsibility (Galatians 6:5, 2 Corinthians 5:10)

2. The idea of the "spiral"

Instead of a two-way bridge to describe Christian communication, an alternative approach to an understanding of contextualization can be described as a hermeneutical spiral in which Scripture is affirmed as supremely authoritative, but an examination of Scripture through the lens of culture moves us toward a better understanding of the Word of God and how it can be brought to bear on and communicated to a particular culture. Using the hermeneutical spiral, evangelicals have been seeking to avoid these extremes:

- *Cultural fundamentalism*: expressing theology in culture-free, universal terms.
- *Cultural relativism*: holding "that the Scripture can have no other meaning than that which is permitted by the conceptuality of the present-day situation".

Evangelicals try to work in the middle of the spiral: insisting that, while there are no universal, culture-free expressions of Biblical truths, there are *absolute, universal truths*.

III. Biblical Contextualization

In this section, we will look at three key passages which provide a biblical view of contextualization and then use Paul's ministry to provide some examples and practical "ways and means" to go about contextualizing the gospel:

- **Romans 1 and 2** provides the basis for contextualization, namely that the Bible takes a mixed view of culture (it is a mixed bag of good and bad; every culture is idolatrous but, at the same time, there is what is called "general revelation" or "common grace"—a non-saving knowledge of God – present in some way in all cultures).
- **1 Corinthians 9** speaks to our motive for contextualization, reminding us that we need to be flexible toward culture, ready to adapt what we can "so that by all possible means [we] might save some" (v. 22b).
- **1 Corinthians 1:22-25** gives us the basic formula for contextualization and shows us how to keep a balance between affirming and confronting culture:
 - Paul confronted the *Greek culture's* idol of "wisdom" and the *Jewish culture's* idol(s) of miraculous signs, power, and strength. While the gospel offended each culture in somewhat different ways, it also drew people in for conversion in somewhat different ways:

- **Greeks** that were saved came to see that the Cross was *ultimate wisdom*; and **Jews** that were saved came to see that the Cross was *true power*.

1. The book of Acts: the speeches of Paul

In his speeches in the book of Acts, Paul communicates to different people groups: Bible-believers (13:13-43); peasant polytheists (14:6-16); sophisticated pagans (17:16-34); Christian elders (10:16-38); a hostile Jewish mob (21:27-22:22); and governing elites with mixed cultural backgrounds (24-26). Paul's gospel presentations differ markedly depending on the culture of the listeners:

- Paul's citation of authority varies with different audiences.
- He varies the order in which truths are introduced as well as his emphasis.
- He varies his use of emotion and reason, vocabulary, introductions and conclusions, figures of speech and illustration, identification of the audience's concerns, hopes, and needs.

But there are also *commonalities* between the speeches:

- In every speech, there is an epistemological challenge, in which people are being told that their understanding of God and ultimate reality is wrong.
- There is a personal challenge regarding sin and the listeners' fallen condition.
- There is a proclamation of Christ as the answer and solution to their sin.
- Finally, there is a call to repent of sin and put faith in Christ.

2. The Appeals of the Bible

D. A. Carson argues that Biblical authors use a *range of motivations* when appealing to their readers to believe and obey the truth:

- Come to God out of fear of judgment and death (Heb. 2:14-18; 10:31).
- Come to God out of a desire for release from the burdens of guilt and shame (Gal. 3:10-12)
- Come to God out of appreciation of the "attractiveness of truth" (1 Cor. 1:8)
- Come to God to satisfy unfulfilled existential longings (John 4)
- Come to God for help with a problem (Matt 9:20-21, 27; Luke 17:11-19; Mark 2:1-12)
- Come to God simply out of a desire to be loved.

IV. Active Contextualization

To reach people in a culture successfully, we must *both enter* the culture respectfully, *and confront* the culture where it contradicts biblical truth. To just confront the culture and rail against its evils, we are unlikely to gain a hearing among those we seek to reach. However, if we simply affirm and reflect the culture, we will rarely see anyone converted. Active contextualization involves a three-part process: *entering* the culture, *challenging* the culture, and then *appealing* to the listeners.

1. Entering the culture

How to enter a culture? Immerse yourself in the questions, hopes, and beliefs of the culture so that you can have a biblical response to its questions. Ultimately, the most important source of learning will be hours and hours spent in close relationship to the people themselves, listening to them in a disciplined way.

What to look for as you "enter" a culture? Contextualized gospel communication will *adapt to a culture in the way it persuades, appeals, and reasons with people*. Illustrations we use are taken from the people's social world; the emotion expressed is within their range of comfort; the questions and issues addressed are highly relevant to them; the authorities cited are respected by them. There are three basic ways to reason according to your target culture:

- **Conceptual.** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through analysis and logic.
- **Concrete relational.** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through relationships and practice.
- **Intuition.** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through insight and experience.

No one way of persuasion is inherently better than the others. All of them can lead to the knowledge of God. But keep in mind that culture is far more complex than these simple distinctions imply. To enter a culture, another main task is to *discern the world-view* of the culture. You should be looking for two kinds of beliefs:

- "A" beliefs: beliefs that roughly correspond to some parts of Biblical teaching. Because of their "A" beliefs, people are predisposed to find plausible some of the Bible's teaching.
- "B" beliefs: These are what could be called "defeater" beliefs — beliefs of the culture that lead listeners to find some Christians doctrines implausible or overtly offensive.

"A" beliefs differ from culture to culture, so we will need to listen carefully. To use an obvious example, in America, what the Bible says about turning the other cheek is welcome (an "A" belief) but what it says about sexuality is resisted (a "B" belief). In the Middle East, we see the

opposite – turning the other cheek seems unjust and impractical, but biblical prohibitions on sexuality make sense.

In our gospel communication, we enter the culture by pointing people to the overlapping beliefs that they can easily affirm. *Do you see this in your culture? Do you see this well-known belief?* The Bible says the same thing. One of the reasons we should take such care to affirm the “A” beliefs and doctrines is because they will become the premises for challenging the culture.

2. Challenging the culture

The reason you must enter before challenging is because your criticism will have no persuasiveness unless it is based on something right in their beliefs that you can affirm. Keller describes this as “floating ‘B’ doctrines on ‘A’ doctrines”. Every culture is profoundly inconsistent, agreeing with some Biblical doctrines but not others. These inconsistencies reveal the points where a culture is vulnerable to confrontation. For example: In Acts 17:28-29, Paul argues against idolatry by showing that it is inconsistent with the pagans’ own (and better) impulses about God. He is saying, “if you believe A about God—and you are right—how can you believe in B?” With the authority of the Bible, we allow one part of the culture – along with the Bible – to critique the other part.

Always show respect and empathy, even when you are challenging and critiquing, saying things such as, “I know many of you will find this disturbing”. Show that you understand. Be the kind of person about whom people conclude that, even if they disagree with you, you are someone they can approach about such matters.

3. Appealing to the listeners

Finally, we should follow the apostle Paul in presenting Christ to our listeners as the ultimate source of what they have been seeking (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16). Paul shows his audience that the ways they are pursuing these good things (i.e. intellect and power) were ultimately self-defeating and then urges them to find ultimate fulfillment of their cultural aspiration in Jesus Christ. So he ends on a positive note, a note of invitation and consolation, though it always comes with a call to repent and believe.

The Bible provides diverse language in expressing the saving work of Christ i.e. the atonement. Some people call them different “models” of atonement, but they are better thought of as different “languages” or “grammars” of atonement:

- *Language of the battlefield.* Christ fought the powers of sin and death for us.
- *Language of the marketplace.* Christ paid the ransom price to buy us out of our indebtedness. He frees us from enslavement.

- *Language of exile.* Christ was exiled and cast out of community so we who deserve to be banished could be brought in. He brings us home.
- *Language of the temple.* Christ is the sacrifice that purifies us and makes us acceptable to draw near to the Holy God. He makes us clean.
- *Language of the court.* Christ stands before the judge and takes the punishment we deserve.

This is not to say that we can pick and choose our preferred "language". Each "language" reflects a piece of inspired Scripture, and each give us an aspect of salvation that the other doesn't. In fact, the irreducible theme that runs through each of these "languages" is that of *substitution*. Regardless of the language used, it is always Jesus acting as our substitute i.e. Jesus fights the powers, pays the price, bears the exile, makes the sacrifice, and bears the punishment for us, in our place, on our behalf. Jesus does what we cannot do for ourselves. He accomplishes salvation; we do nothing at all. At the heart of the saving work of Christ, the atonement, is the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus.

In summary, we must show our listeners that the plot-lines of their lives can only find a truly 'happy ending' in Jesus. *We must retell the culture's story in the Jesus.*

Questions for thought or discussion:

1. Keller defines contextualization as "giving people (1) *the Bible's answers*, which they may not want to hear, to (2) *questions about life* that people in their particular time and place are asking, (3) *in language and forms* they can comprehend, and (4) *through appeals and arguments* with force they can feel, even if they reject them." Unpack this definition. Which of the four elements do you tend to do best? Which do you tend to overlook?
2. Have you ever experienced the benefit of interacting with another culture in a way that you begin to see truths and insights in the Bible that were there all along, yet we had simply been blind to them? What blind spots has this experience revealed to you in your own understanding of the Bible and the gospel?
3. Most of us come to Christ through one of the motivations articulated by D.A. Carson. It is natural for us to exclusively use this motivation in our appeals to others. However, we do not have the right to choose one of these motivations and appeal to it restrictively. Which of the six ways of making appeals described in this study are most comfortable and natural for you? Which are most difficult? Why?

4. Take a moment to identify a key "A" doctrine – a teaching from the Bible that would be generally accepted and affirmed by your target culture – and how it expresses itself in the culture through "A" beliefs. What is an example of a "B" belief in your culture, and what Bible doctrines does it conflict with directly? Think about Singapore or another culture you're familiar with as you answer.

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cause we know what is coming behind the crocus. The spring comes slowly down this way; but the great thing is that the corner has been turned. There is, of course, this difference, that in the natural spring the crocus cannot choose whether it will respond or not. We can. We have the power either of withstanding the spring, and sinking back into the cosmic winter, or of going on into those 'high mid-summer pomps' in which our Leader, the Son of man, already dwells, and to which He is calling us. It remains with us to follow or not, to die in this winter, or to go on into that spring and that summer.

10

CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

SOME OF YOU ARE PRIESTS AND SOME ARE LEADERS OF youth organizations.¹ I have little right to address either. It is for priests to teach me, not for me to teach them. I have never helped to organize youth, and while I was young myself I successfully avoided being organized. If I address you it is in response to a request so urged that I came to regard compliance as a matter of Obedience.

I am to talk about Apologetics. Apologetics means of course Defence. The first question is — what do you propose to defend? Christianity, of course: and Christianity as understood by the Church in Wales. And here at the outset I must deal with an unpleasant business. It seems to the layman that in the Church of England we often hear from our priests doctrine which is not Anglican Christianity. It may depart from Anglican Christianity in either of two ways: (1) It may be so 'broad' or 'liberal' or 'modern' that it in fact excludes any real Supernaturalism and thus ceases to be Christian at all. (2) It may, on the other hand, be Roman. It is not, of course, for me to define to you what Anglican Christianity is

I am your pupil, not your teacher. But I insist that wherever you draw the lines, bounding lines must exist, beyond which your doctrine will cease either to be Anglican or to be Christian: and I suggest also that the lines come a great deal sooner than many modern priests think. I think it is your duty

¹ This paper was read to an assembly of Anglican priests and youth leaders at the 'Carmarthen Conference for Youth Leaders and Junior Clergy' of the Church in Wales at Carmarthen during Easter 1945.

to fix the lines clearly in your own minds: and if you wish to go beyond them you must change your profession.

This is your duty not specially as Christians or as priests but as honest men. There is a danger here of the clergy developing a special professional conscience which obscures the very plain moral issue. Men who have passed beyond these boundary lines in either direction are apt to protest that they have come by their unorthodox opinions honestly. In defence of those opinions they are prepared to suffer obloquy and to forfeit professional advancement. They thus come to feel like martyrs. But this simply misses the point which so gravely scandalizes the layman. We never doubted that the unorthodox opinions were honestly held: what we complain of is your continuing your ministry after you have come to hold them. We always knew that a man who makes his living as a paid agent of the Conservative Party may honestly change his views and honestly become a Communist. What we deny is that he can honestly continue to be a Conservative agent and to receive money from one party while he supports the policy of another.

Even when we have thus ruled out teaching which is in direct contradiction to our profession, we must define our task still further. We are to defend Christianity itself — the faith preached by the Apostles, attested by the Martyrs, embodied in the Creeds, expounded by the Fathers. This must be clearly distinguished from the whole of what any one of us may think about God and Man. Each of us has his individual emphasis: each holds, in addition to the Faith, many opinions which seem to him to be consistent with it and true and important. And so perhaps they are. But as apologists it is not our business to defend *them*. We are defending Christianity; not 'my religion'. When we mention our personal opinions we must always make quite clear the difference between them and the Faith itself. St Paul has given us the model in I Corinthians vii. 25: on a certain point he has 'no commandment of the Lord' but gives 'his judgement'. No one is left in doubt as to the difference in *status* implied.

This distinction, which is demanded by honesty, also gives the apologist a great tactical advantage. The great difficulty is to get modern audiences to realize that you are preaching Christianity solely and simply because you happen to think

it *true*; they always suppose you are preaching it because you like it or think it good for society or something of that sort. Now a clearly maintained distinction between what the Faith actually says and what you would like it to have said or what you understand or what you personally find helpful or think probable, forces your audience to realize that you are tied to your data just as the scientist is tied by the results of the experiments; that you are not just saying what you like. This immediately helps them to realize that what is being discussed is a question about objective fact — not gas about ideals and points of view.

Secondly, this scrupulous care to preserve the Christian message as something distinct from one's own ideas, has one very good effect upon the apologist himself. It forces him, again and again, to face up to those elements in original Christianity which he personally finds obscure or repulsive. He is saved from the temptation to skip or slur or ignore what he finds disagreeable. And the man who yields to that temptation will, of course, never progress in Christian knowledge. For obviously the doctrines which one finds easy are the doctrines which give Christian sanction to truths you already knew. The new truth which you do not know and which you need most, in the very nature of things, be hidden precisely in the doctrines you least like and least understand. It is just the same here as in science. The phenomenon which is troublesome, which doesn't fit in with the current scientific theories, is the phenomenon which compels reconsideration and thus leads to new knowledge. Science progresses because scientists, instead of running away from such troublesome phenomena or hushing them up, are constantly seeking them out. In the same way, there will be progress in Christian knowledge only as long as we accept the challenge of the difficult or repellent doctrines. A 'liberal' Christianity which considers itself free to alter the Faith whenever the Faith looks perplexing or repellent *must* be completely stagnant. Progress is made only into a *resisting* material.

From this there follows a corollary about the Apologist's private reading. There are two questions he will naturally ask himself. (1) Have I been 'keeping up', keeping abreast of recent movements in theology? (2) Have I stood firm (*super*

monstratas vias)² amidst all these 'winds of doctrine'?³ I want to say emphatically that the second question is far the more important of the two. Our upbringing and the whole atmosphere of the world we live in make it certain that our main temptation will be that of yielding to winds of doctrine, not that of ignoring them. We are not at all likely to be hide-bound: we are very likely indeed to be the slaves of fashion. If one has to choose between reading the new books and reading the old, one must choose the old: not because they are necessarily better but because they contain precisely those truths of which our own age is neglectful. The standard of permanent Christianity must be kept clear in our minds and it is against that standard that we must test all contemporary thought. In fact, we must at all costs *not* move with the times. We serve One who said 'Heaven and Earth shall move with the times, but my words shall not move with the times.'⁴

I am speaking, so far, of theological reading. Scientific reading is a different matter. If you know any science it is very desirable that you should keep it up. We have to answer the current scientific attitude towards Christianity, not the attitude which scientists adopted one hundred years ago. Science is in continual change and we must try to keep abreast of it. For the same reason, we must be very cautious of snatching at any scientific theory which, for the moment, seems to be in our favour. We may *mention* such things; but we must mention them lightly and without claiming that they are more than 'interesting'. Sentences beginning 'Science has now proved' should be avoided. If we try to base our apologetic on some recent development in science, we shall usually find that just as we have put the finishing touches to our argument science has changed its mind and quietly withdrawn the theory we have been using as our foundation stone. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*⁵ is a sound principle.

² The source of this is, I believe, Jeremiah vi. 16: 'State super vias et videte, et interrogate de semitis antiquis quae sit via bona, et ambulate in ea' which is translated 'Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein.'

³ Ephesians iv. 14.

⁴ Matthew xxiv. 35; Mark xiii. 31; Luke xxi. 33.

⁵ 'I fear the Greeks even when they bear gifts', Virgil, *Aeneid*, bk. II, line 49.

While we are on the subject of science, let me digress for a moment. I believe that any Christian who is qualified to write a good popular book on any science may do much more by that than by any directly apologetic work. The difficulty we are up against is this. We can make people (often) attend to the Christian point of view for half an hour or so; but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted. As long as that situation exists, widespread success is simply impossible. We must attack the enemy's line of communication. What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity *latent*. You can see this most easily if you look at it the other way round. Our Faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if whenever we read an elementary book on Geology, Botany, Politics, or Astronomy, we found that its implications were Hindu, that would shake us. It is not the books written in direct defence of Materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian. The first step to the re-conversion of this country is a series, produced by Christians, which can beat the *Penguin* and the *Thinkers Library* on their own ground. Its Christianity would have to be latent, not explicit: and of *course* its science perfectly honest. Science *twisted* in the interests of apologetics would be sin and folly. But I must return to my immediate subject.

Our business is to present that which is timeless (the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow)⁶ in the particular language of our own age. The bad preacher does exactly the opposite: he takes the ideas of our own age and tricks them out in the traditional language of Christianity. Thus, for example, he may think about the Beveridge Report⁷ and *talk* about the coming

⁶ Hebrews xiii. 8.

⁷ Sir William H. Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, Command Paper 6404, Parliamentary Session 1942-43 (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1942). The 'Beveridge Report' is a plan for the present Social Security system in Britain.

of education, his state of mind is very difficult to realize. To us the Present has always appeared as one section in a huge continuous process. In his mind the Present occupies almost the whole field of vision. Beyond it, isolated from it, and quite unimportant, is something called 'The Old Days' — a small, comic jungle in which highwaymen, Queen Elizabeth, knights-in-armour etc. wander about. Then (strangest of all) beyond The Old Days comes a picture of 'Primitive Man'. He is 'Science', not 'history', and is therefore felt to be much more real than The Old Days. In other words, the Pre-historic is much more believed in than the Historic.

(2) He has a distrust (very rational in the state of his knowledge) of ancient texts. Thus a man has sometimes said to me 'These records were written in the days before printing, weren't they? and you haven't got the original bit of paper, have you? So what it comes to is that someone wrote something and someone else copied it and someone else copied *that* and so on. Well, by the time it comes to us, it won't be in the least like the original.' This is a difficult objection to deal with because one cannot, there and then, start teaching the whole science of textual criticism. But at this point their real religion (i.e. faith in 'science') has come to my aid. The assurance that there is a 'Science' called 'Textual Criticism' and that its results (not only as regards the New Testament, but as regards ancient texts in general) are generally accepted, will usually be received without objection. (I need hardly point out that the word 'text' must not be used, since to your audience it means only 'a scriptural quotation'.)

(3) A sense of sin is almost totally lacking. Our situation is thus very different from that of the Apostles. The Pagans (and still more the *metuentes*⁹) to whom they preached were haunted by a sense of guilt and to them the Gospel was, therefore, 'good news'. We address people who have been trained to believe that whatever goes wrong in the world is someone else's fault — the Capitalists, the Government's, the Nazis, the Generals' etc. They approach God Himself as His *judges*. They want to know, not whether they can be acquitted for sin, but whether He can be acquitted for creating such a world.

⁹ The *metuentes* or 'god-fearers' were a class of Gentiles who worshipped God without submitting to circumcision and the other ceremonial obligations of the Jewish Law. See Psalm cxviii. 4 and Acts x. 2.

of the Kingdom. The core of his thought is merely contemporary; only the superficial is traditional. But your teaching must be timeless at its heart and wear a modern dress.

This raises the question of Theology and Politics. The nearest I can get to a settlement of the frontier problem between them is this: — that Theology teaches us what ends are desirable and what means are lawful, while Politics teaches what means are effective. Thus Theology tells us that every man ought to have a decent wage. Politics tells by what means this is likely to be attained. Theology tells us which of these means are consistent with justice and charity. On the political question guidance comes not from Revelation but from natural prudence, knowledge of complicated facts and ripe experience. If we have these qualifications we may, of course, state our political opinions: but then we must make it quite clear that we are giving our personal judgement and have no command from the Lord. Not many priests have these qualifications. Most political sermons teach the congregation nothing except what newspapers are taken at the Rectory.

Our great danger at present is lest the Church should continue to practise a merely missionary technique in what has become a missionary situation. A century ago our task was to edify those who had been brought up in the Faith: our present task is chiefly to convert and instruct infidels. Great Britain is as much part of the mission field as China. Now if you were sent to the Bantus you would be taught their language and traditions. You need similar teaching about the language and mental habits of your own uneducated and unbelieving fellow countrymen. Many priests are quite ignorant on this subject. What I know about it I have learned from talking in R.A.F.⁸ camps. They were mostly inhabited by Englishmen and, therefore, some of what I shall say may be irrelevant to the situation in Wales. You will sift out what does not apply.

(1) I find that the uneducated Englishman is an almost total sceptic about History. I had expected he would disbelieve the Gospels because they contain miracles: but he really disbelieves them because they deal with things that happened 2000 years ago. He would disbelieve equally in the battle of Actium if he heard of it. To those who have had our kind

⁸ The Royal Air Force.

In attacking this fatal insensibility it is useless to direct attention (a) To sins your audience do not commit, or (b) To things they do, but do not regard as sins. They are usually not drunkards. They are mostly fornicators, but then they do not feel fornication to be wrong. It is, therefore, useless to dwell on either of these subjects. (Now that contraceptives have removed the obviously *uncharitable* element in fornication I do not myself think we can expect people to recognize it as sin until they have accepted Christianity as a whole.)

I cannot offer you a water-tight technique for awakening the sense of sin. I can only say that, in my experience, if one begins from the sin that has been one's own chief problem during the last week, one is very often surprised at the way this shaft goes home. But whatever method we use, our continual effort must be to get their mind away from public affairs and 'crime' and bring them down to brass tacks—to the whole network of spite, greed, envy, unfairness and conceit in the lives of 'ordinary decent people' like themselves (and ourselves).

(4) We must learn the language of our audience. And let me say at the outset that it is no use at all laying down *a priori* what the 'plain man' does or does not understand. You have to find out by experience. Thus most of us would have supposed that the change from 'may truly and impartially minister justice' to 'may truly and impartially' made that place easier to the uneducated; but a priest of my acquaintance discovered that his sexton saw no difficulty in *indifferently* ('It means making no difference between one man and another' he said) but had no idea what *impartially* meant.

On this question of language the best thing I can do is to make a list of words which are used by the people in a sense different from ours.

ATONEMENT. Does not really exist in a spoken modern English, though it would be recognized as 'a religious word'. In so far as it conveys any meaning to the unedu-

¹⁰ The first quotation is from the prayer for the 'Whole state of Christ's Church' in the service of Holy Communion, Prayer Book (1662). The second is the revised form of that same phrase as found in the 1928 Prayer Book.

cated I think it means *compensation*. No one word will express to them what Christians mean by *Atonement*: you must paraphrase.

BEING. (Noun) Never means merely 'entity' in popular speech. Often it means what we should call a 'personal being' (e.g. a man said to me 'I believe in the Holy Ghost but I don't think He is a being!').

CATHOLIC means Papistical.

CHARITY. Means (a) Alms (b) A 'charitable organization' (c) Much more rarely—Indulgence (i.e. a 'charitable' attitude towards a man is conceived as one that denies or condones his sins, not as one that loves the sinner in spite of them).

CHRISTIAN. Has come to include almost no idea of *belief*. Usually a vague term of approval. The question 'What do you call a Christian?' has been asked of me again and again. The answer they *wish* to receive is 'A Christian is a decent chap who's unselfish etc.'

CHURCH. Means (a) A sacred building, (b) The clergy. Does *not* suggest to them the 'company of all faithful people'.¹¹ Generally used in a bad sense. Direct defence of the Church is part of our duty; but use of the word *Church* where there is no time to defend it alienates sympathy and should be avoided where possible.

CREATIVE. Now means merely 'talented', 'original'. The idea of creation in the theological sense is absent from their minds.

CREATURE means 'beast', 'irrational animal'. Such an expression as 'We are only creatures' would almost certainly be misunderstood.

CRUCIFIXION, CROSS etc. Centuries of hymnody and religious cant have so exhausted these words that they now very faintly—if at all—convey the idea of execution by torture. It is better to paraphrase; and, for the same reason, to say *flogged* for New Testament *scourged*.¹²

DOGMA. Used by the people only in a bad sense to mean 'unproved assertion delivered in an arrogant manner'.

¹¹ A phrase which occurs in the prayer of 'Thanksgiving' at the end of the service of Holy Communion.

¹² Matthew xxvii. 26; Mark xv. 15; John xix. 1.

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION. In the mouth of an uneducated speaker *always* means *Virgin Birth*.

MORALITY means *chastity*.
PERSONAL. I had argued for at least ten minutes with a man about the existence of a 'personal devil' before I discovered that *personal* meant to him *corporeal*. I suspect this of being widespread. When they say they don't believe in a 'personal' God they may often mean only that they are not anthropomorphists.

POTENTIAL. When used at all is used in an engineering sense: *never* means 'possible'.

PRIMITIVE. Means crude, clumsy, unfinished, inefficient.
 'Primitive Christianity' would not mean to them at all what it does to you.

SACRIFICE. Has no associations with temple and altar. They are familiar with this word only in the journalistic sense ('The Nation must be prepared for heavy sacrifices.').

SPIRITUAL. Means primarily *immaterial*, *incorporeal*, but with serious confusions from the Christian uses of *πνεῦμα*.¹³ Hence the idea that whatever is 'spiritual' in the sense of 'non-sensuous' is somehow *better* than anything sensuous: e.g., they don't really believe that envy could be as bad as drunkenness.

VULGARITY. Usually means obscenity or 'smut'. There are bad confusions (and not only in uneducated minds) between:
 (a) The obscene or lascivious: what is calculated to provoke lust. (b) The indecorous: what offends against good taste or propriety. (c) The vulgar proper: what is socially 'low'. 'Good' people tend to think (b) as sinful as (a) with the result that others feel (a) to be just as innocent as (b).

To conclude — you must translate every bit of your Theology into the vernacular. This is very troublesome and it means you can say very little in half an hour, but it is essential. It is also of the greatest service to your own thought. I have come to the conviction that if you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts were confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood one's own meaning. A passage from some theological

¹³ Which means 'spirit', as in I Corinthians xiv. 12.

work for translation into the vernacular ought to be a compulsory paper in every Ordination examination.

I turn now to the question of the actual attack. This may be either emotional or intellectual. If I speak only of the intellectual kind, that is not because I undervalue the other but because, not having been given the gifts necessary for carrying it out, I cannot give advice about it. But I wish to say most emphatically that where a speaker has that gift, the direct evangelical appeal of the 'Come to Jesus' type can be as overwhelming today as it was a hundred years ago. I have seen it done, precluded by a religious film and accompanied by hymn singing, and with very remarkable effect. I cannot do it: but those who can ought to do it with all their might. I am not sure that the ideal missionary team ought not to consist of one who argues and one who (in the fullest sense of the word) preaches. Put up your arguer first to undermine their intellectual prejudices; then let the evangelist proper launch his appeal. I have seen this done with great success. But here I must concern myself only with the intellectual attack. *Non omnia possumus omnes*.¹⁴

And first, a word of encouragement. Uneducated people are not irrational people. I have found that they will endure, and can follow, quite a lot of sustained argument if you go slowly. Often, indeed, the novelty of it (for they have seldom met it before) delights them.

Do not attempt to water Christianity down. There must be no pretence that you can have it with the Supernatural left out. So far as I can see Christianity is precisely the one religion from which the miraculous cannot be separated. You must frankly argue for supernaturalism from the very outset.

The two popular 'difficulties' you will probably have to deal with are these. (1) 'Now that we know how huge the universe is and how insignificant the Earth, it is ridiculous to believe that the universal God should be specially interested in our concerns.' In answer to this you must first correct their error about *fact*. The insignificance of Earth in relation to the universe is not a modern discovery: nearly 2000 years ago Ptolemy (*Almagest*, bk. 1, ch. v) said that in relation to the distance of the fixed stars Earth must be treated as a mathematical point without magnitude. Secondly, you should

¹⁴ 'Not all things can we all do', Virgil, *Eclogues*, bk. VIII, line 63.

point out that Christianity says what God has done for Man; it doesn't say (because it doesn't know) what He has or has not done in other parts of the universe. Thirdly, you might recall the parable of the one lost sheep.¹⁵ If Earth has been specially sought by God (which we don't know) that may not imply that it is the most important thing in the universe, but only that it has *strayed*. Finally, challenge the whole tendency to identify size and importance. Is an elephant more important than a man, or a man's leg than his brain?

(2) 'People believed in miracles in the Old Days because they didn't then know that they were contrary to the Laws of Nature.' But they did. If St Joseph didn't know that a virgin birth was contrary to Nature (i.e. if he didn't know the normal origin of babies) why, on discovering his wife's pregnancy, was he 'minded to put her away'?¹⁶ Obviously, no event would be recorded as a wonder *unless* the recorders knew the natural order and saw that this was an exception. If people didn't yet know that the Sun rose in the East they wouldn't be even interested in its once rising in the West. They would not record it as a *miraculum* — nor indeed record it at all. The very idea of 'miracle' presupposes knowledge of the Laws of Nature; you can't have the idea of an exception until you have the idea of a rule.

It is very difficult to produce arguments on the popular level for the existence of God. And many of the most popular arguments seem to me invalid. Some of these may be produced in discussion by friendly members of the audience. This raises the whole problem of the 'embarrassing supporter'. It is brutal (and dangerous) to repel him; it is often dishonest to agree with what he says. I usually try to avoid saying anything about the validity of his argument *in itself* and reply, 'Yes. That may do for you and me. But I'm afraid if we take that line our friend here on my left might say etc. etc.'

Fortunately, though very oddly, I have found that people are usually disposed to hear the divinity of Our Lord discussed *before* going into the existence of God. When I began I used, if I were giving two lectures, to devote the first to mere Theism; but I soon gave up this method because it

¹⁵ Matthew xviii. 11-14; Luke xv. 4-7.

¹⁶ Matthew i. 19.

seemed to arouse little interest. The number of clear and determined atheists is apparently not very large.

When we come to the Incarnation itself, I usually find that some form of the *aut Deus aut malus homo*¹⁷ can be used. The majority of them start with the idea of the 'great human teacher' who was deified by His superstitious followers. It must be pointed out how very improbable this is among Jews and how different to anything that happened with Plato, Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed. The Lord's own words and claims (of which many are quite ignorant) must be forced home. (The whole case, on a popular level, is very well put indeed in Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*.)

Something will usually have to be said about the historicity of the Gospels. You who are trained theologians will be able to do this in ways which I could not. My own line was to say that I was a professional literary critic and I thought I did know the difference between legend and historical writing: that the Gospels were certainly not legends (in one sense they're not *good* enough); and that if they are not history then they are realistic prose fiction of a kind which actually never existed before the eighteenth century. Little episodes such as Jesus writing in the dust when they brought Him the woman taken in adultery¹⁸ (which have no *doctrinal* significance at all) are the mark.

One of the great difficulties is to keep before the audience's mind the question of Truth. They always think you are recommending Christianity not because it is *true* but because it is *good*. And in the discussion they will at every moment try to escape from the issue 'True — or False' into stuff about a good society, or morals, or the incomes of Bishops, or the Spanish Inquisition, or France, or Poland — or anything whatever. You have to keep forcing them back, and again back, to the real point. Only thus will you be able to undermine (a) Their belief that a certain amount of 'religion' is desirable but one mustn't carry it too far. One must keep on pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of *no* importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important. (b) Their firm disbelief

¹⁷ 'Either God or a bad man.'

¹⁸ John viii. 3-8.

of Article XVIII.¹⁹ Of course it should be pointed out that, though all salvation is through Jesus, we need not conclude that He cannot save those who have not explicitly accepted Him in this life. And it should (at least in my judgement) be made clear that we are not pronouncing all other religions to be totally false, but rather saying that in Christ whatever is true in all religions is consummated and perfected. But, on the other hand, I think we must attack wherever we meet it the nonsensical idea that mutually exclusive propositions about God can both be true.

For my own part, I have sometimes told my audience that the only two things really worth considering are Christianity and Hinduism. (Islam is only the greatest of the Christian heresies, Buddhism only the greatest of the Hindu heresies. Real Paganism is dead. All that was best in Judaism and Platonism survives in Christianity.) There isn't really, for an adult mind, this infinite variety of religions to consider. We may *salva reverentia*²⁰ divide religions, as we do soups, into 'thick' and 'clear'. By Thick I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of Thick religions. By Clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical and universalizing: Stoicism, Buddhism, and the Ethical Church are Clear religions. Now if there is a true religion it must be both Thick and Clear: for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly. And the only two religions that fulfil this condition are Hinduism and Christianity. But Hinduism fulfils it imperfectly. The Clear religion of the Brahmin hermit in the jungle and the Thick religion of the neighbouring temple go on *side by side*. The Brahmin hermit doesn't bother about the temple prostitution nor the worshipper in the temple about the hermit's metaphysics. But Christianity really breaks down the middle wall of the partition. It takes a convert from central Africa and

¹⁹ Article XVIII in the Prayer Book: *Of obtaining eternal Salvation only by the Name of Christ*, which says 'They also are to be had accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the light of Nature. For holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.'

²⁰ 'Without outraging reverence.'

tells him to obey an enlightened universalist ethic: it takes a twentieth-century academic prig like me and tells me to go fasting to a Mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord. The savage convert has to be Clear: I have to be Thick. That is how one knows one has come to the real religion.

One last word. I have found that nothing is more dangerous to one's own faith than the work of an apologist. No doctrine of that Faith seems to me so spectral, so unreal as one that I have just successfully defended in a public debate. For a moment, you see, it has seemed to rest on oneself: as a result, when you go away from that debate, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar. That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments, as from our intellectual counters, into the Reality — from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself. That also is why we need one another's continual help — *oremus pro invicem*.²¹

²¹ 'Let us pray for each other.'

BEFORE WE CAN COMMUNICATE

I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO WRITE ABOUT 'THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNICATION'; by which my inquirer meant 'communication under modern conditions between Christians and the outer world'. And, as usually happens to me when I am questioned, I feel a little embarrassed by the simplicity and unexcitingness of the answer I want to give. I feel that what I have to say is on a cruder and lower level than was hoped for.

My ideas about 'communication' are purely empirical, and two anecdotes (both strictly true) will illustrate the sort of experience on which they are based.

1. The old Prayer Book prayed that the magistrates might 'truly and indifferently administer justice'. Then the revisers thought they would make this easier by altering *indifferently* to *impartially*. A country clergyman of my acquaintance asked his sexton what he thought *indifferently* meant, and got the correct answer, 'It means making no difference between one chap and another.' 'And what', continued the parson, 'do you think *impartially* means?' 'Ah', said the sexton after a pause, 'I wouldn't know *that*.'

Everyone sees what the revisers had in mind. They were afraid that the 'man in the pew' would take *indifferently* to mean, as it often does, 'carelessly', without concern. They knew that this error would not be made by highly-educated people, but they thought it would be made by everyone else. The sexton's reply, however, reveals that it will not be made

by the least educated class of all. It will be made only by those who are educationally in the middle; those whose language is fashionable (our elders would have said 'polite') without being scholarly. The highest and lowest classes are both equally safe from it; and *impartially*, which guards the 'middle' churchgoers from misunderstanding, is meaningless to the simple.

2. During the war I got into a discussion with a working man about the Devil. He said he believed in a Devil, but 'not a personal Devil'. As the discussion proceeded it grew more and more perplexing to both parties. It became clear that we were somehow at cross-purposes. Then, suddenly and almost by accident, I discovered what was wrong. It became obvious that he had, all along, been meaning by the word *personal* nothing more or less or other than *corporeal*. He was a very intelligent man, and, once this discovery had been made, there was no difficulty. Apparently we had not really disagreed about anything: the difference between us was merely one of vocabulary. It set me wondering how many of the thousands of people who say they 'believe in God but not in a personal God' are really trying to tell us no more than that they are not, in the strict sense, *anthropomorphists* and are, in fact, asserting, on this point, their perfect orthodoxy.

Where the revisers of the Prayer Book and I both went wrong was this. We both had *a priori* notions of what simple people mean by words. I assumed that the workman's usage was the same as my own. The revisers, more subtly but not more correctly, assumed that all would know the sense of *indifferently* which they were guarding against when they amended it. But apparently we must not decide *a priori* what other people mean by English words any more than what Frenchmen mean by French words. We must be wholly empirical. We must listen, and note, and memorise. And of course we must set aside every trace of snobbery or pedantry about 'right' or 'wrong' usages.

Now this is, I feel, very hum-drum and work-a-day. When one wants to discuss the problem of communication on a grand, philosophical level, when one wants to talk about conflicts of *Welanschauung* and the predicament of modern, or urban, or crisis consciousness, it is chilling to be told that the first step is simply linguistic in the crudest sense. But it is.

What we want to see in every ordination exam is a compulsory paper on (simply) translation; a passage from some theological work to be turned into plain vernacular English. Just turned; not adorned, nor diluted, nor made 'matey'. The exercise is very like doing Latin prose. Instead of saying, 'How would Cicero have said that?', you have to ask yourself, 'How would my scout or bedmaker have said that?'

You will at once find that this labour has two useful by-products.

1. In the very process of eliminating from your matter all that is technical, learned, or allusive, you will discover, perhaps for the first time, the true value of learned language: namely, brevity. It can say in ten words what popular speech can hardly get into a hundred. Your popularisation of the passage set will have to be very much longer than the original. And this we must just put up with.

2. You will also discover — at least I, a copious 'translator', think I have discovered — just how much you yourself have, up to that moment, been understanding the language which you are now trying to translate. Again and again I have been most usefully humiliated in this way. One holds, or thinks one holds, a particular view, say, of the Atonement or Orders or Inspiration. And you can go on for years discussing and defending it to others of *your own sort*. New refinements can be introduced to meet its critics; brilliant metaphors can seem to illuminate its obscurities; comparisons with other views, 'placings' of it, are somehow felt to establish its position in a sort of aristocracy of ideas. For the others are all talking the same language and all move in the same world of discourse. All seems well. Then turn and try to expound this same view to an intelligent mechanic or a sincerely inquisitive, but superficially quite irreverent, schoolboy. Some question of shattering crudity (it would never be asked in learned circles) will be shot at you. You are like a skilled swordsman transfixed by an opponent who wins just because he knows none of the first principles. The crude question turns out to be fatal. You have never, it now appears, really understood what you have so long maintained. You haven't really thought it out not to the end; not to 'the absolute ruddy end'.

You must either give it up, or else begin it all over again. If, given patience and ordinary skill, you cannot explain a

thing to any sensible person whatever (provided he will listen), then you don't really understand it yourself. Here too it is very like doing Latin prose; the bits you can't get into Latin are usually the bits you haven't really grasped in the English.

What we need to be particularly on our guard against are precisely the vogue-words, the incantatory words, of our own circle. For your generation they are, perhaps, *engagement, commitment, over against, under judgement, existential, crisis, and confrontation*. These are, of all expressions, the least likely to be intelligible to anyone divided from you by a school of thought, by a decade, by a social class. They are like a family language, or a school slang. And our private language may delude ourselves as well as mystifying outsiders. Enchanted words seem so full of meaning, so illuminating. But we may be deceived. What we derive from them may sometimes be not so much a clear conception as a heart-warming sense of being at home and among our own sort. 'We understand one another' often means 'We are in sympathy.' Sympathy is a good thing. It may even be in some ways a better thing than intellectual understanding. But not the same thing.