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**CHRISTIANITY  
THE  
DEBIT  
ACCOUNT**

**NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY**

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## CHRISTIANITY: THE DEBIT ACCOUNT

IN 1955 I gave two broadcast talks on *Morals without Religion*, in which I suggested that Scientific Humanism was the natural successor to Christianity. The broadcasts caused some excitement: and many Christians protested, with varying degrees of vehemence, that it was a pity I did not know more about the religion I had so irresponsibly attacked.

I thought there might be something in this. Up to the time of the broadcasts, I had been interested in philosophical theism rather than in historical Christianity, about which I knew no more than the average layman who has had a nominally Christian education. So I decided to fill this gap in my knowledge. In the last few years I have studied the Bible diligently, and now, I suspect, know a good deal more about it than the average vicar; and I have also read many books about the origins and history of the Church. This reading has altered my view profoundly.

At the time of the broadcasts, I held two assumptions that were common among the more highbrow type of sceptic. These were: (i) that Jesus, though he was deluded in believing himself to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, was, nevertheless, a great moral teacher, and a man of outstanding moral excellence, and (ii) that though Christianity is now rapidly being outgrown, it was a great force for good in its day. In the light of wider knowledge, both assumptions now seem to me to be false. I now incline to the view that the conversion of Europe to Christianity was one of the greatest disasters of history.

### "Gentle Jesus"

To deal first with the personality of Jesus. If one reads the Gospels with a fresh mind, one gets a picture of the founder of Christianity that is quite startlingly different from the traditional "gentle Jesus". The conception of Jesus as meek and gentle may derive in part from his refusal to plead his cause before Pilate. But Jesus may well, by this time, have identified himself with the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53 ('He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth') - and have been consciously fulfilling the role for which he believed he was prophetically destined. In his preaching, he continually extolled loving kindness and meekness, but, as so often happens, his practice fell short of his precepts. He was, it is true, gentle and affectionate towards his disciples and towards those who took him at his own valuation: and he was tolerant towards self-confessed sinners. But he was a fanatic; and, like most fanatics, he could not tolerate disagreement or criticism. Towards the Pharisees and others who were sceptical of his messianic pretensions, he was often savagely vindictive. Any hint of criticism, any demand that he should produce evidence for his claims, was liable to provoke a torrent of wrath and denunciation. Most of Chapter 23 of St. Matthew's Gospel, for example, is not, as we are encouraged to regard it, a lofty and dignified rebuke: it is what on any other lips would be described as a stream of invective. "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which, indeed, appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness . . . Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" This can hardly be called loving one's enemies.

Jesus, in fact, was typical of a certain kind of fanatical young idealist . . . at one moment holding forth, with tears in his eyes, about the need for universal love; at the next, furiously denouncing the morons, crooks and bigots who do not see eye to eye with him. It is very natural and very human behaviour. But it is not superhuman. Many of the great men of history (for example, Socrates) have met criticism with more dignity and restraint.

### Historical Christianity

Clerics frequently refer to "the Christian message" of love and human brotherhood. But there is nothing exclusively Christian about this message; it is basic to modern Humanism, as it was to the

pre-Christian Humanism of China, Greece and Rome. In the 6th century BC Confucius propounded the Golden Rule, and Lao-Tzu enjoined his followers to "requite injuries with good deeds". And later the Stoics, among others, emphatically proclaimed the brotherhood of man regardless of race or nation. There is no ground whatever for the claim, so often made by religious apologists, that these ideals are specifically Christian and originated with Jesus.

What *were* specifically Christian were some less enlightened teachings, which have done untold harm. Christians claim that organised Christianity has been a great force for good, but this view can be maintained on one assumption only: that everything good in the Christian era is a result of Christianity, and that everything bad happened in spite of it. But, as a matter of historical fact many of the worst features of life in the ages of faith (and later) have stemmed directly from the teaching of the Church. Outstanding among these features are the doctrine of hell, intolerance and persecution, anti-intellectualism, asceticism, otherworldliness, and the condonation of slavery.

The hideous doctrine of eternal torment after death has probably caused more terror and misery, more cruelty and more violation of natural human sympathy, than any religious belief in the history of mankind. Yet this doctrine was unambiguously taught by Jesus. "The Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth" (Matt., Ch. 14). "Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire . . . And these shall go away into everlasting punishment" (Matt., Ch. 725). "He that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath, never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation" (Mark, Ch. 3).

The Roman Catholic Church still teaches the doctrine of eternal punishment, but the current tendency among Protestants is to say that Jesus's pronouncements on this subject were "symbolic". But no one has yet answered the question why, if Jesus did not intend his statements about hell to be taken literally, he made them in a form that ensured that they would be taken literally. Why, in other words, did he deliberately mislead his hearers? If he was God, he must surely have been able to foresee what disastrous results would follow.

### **Intolerance and Persecution**

No other religion has such a bloodstained record as Christianity. During the ages of faith the Church argued, not illogically, that any degree of cruelty towards sinners and heretics was justified, if there was a chance that it could save them, or others, from the eternal torments of hell. Thus, in the name of the religion of love, hundreds of thousands of people were not merely killed but atrociously tortured in ways that make the gas chambers of Belsen seem humane.

Europe, also, was frequently devastated by religious wars, which destroyed a far higher proportion of the population than the global wars of the twentieth century. The Thirty Years' War, for example, reduced the population of Germany by a third.

### **Anti-intellectualism**

Jesus exhorted his followers to "become as little children", and the Church throughout history has extolled credulity, and feared and distrusted the free intelligence. During the Dark Ages the Church was in control of education, and for centuries scarcely anyone who was not a potential priest learned to read or write. One of the most persistent fallacies about the Christian Church is that it kept learning alive during the Dark and Middle Ages. What the Church did was to keep learning alive in the monasteries, while preventing the spread of knowledge outside them. To quote W. H. Lecky, "The period of Catholic ascendancy was on the whole one of the most deplorable in the history of the human mind . . . The spirit that shrinks from enquiry as sinful and deems a state of doubt a state of guilt, is the most enduring disease that can afflict the mind of man. Not till the education of Europe passed from the monasteries

to the universities, not till Mohammedan science, and classical free thought, and industrial independence broke the sceptre of the Church, did the intellectual revival of Europe begin (*History of European Morals*, Ch. IV). Even as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, nine-tenths of Christian Europe was illiterate.

### **Asceticism and Otherworldliness**

Jesus was a celibate, who appeared to regard sexual love as displeasing to God. "The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage: but they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Luke, Ch. 26). "There be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (Matt., Ch. 19). This tendency was even stronger in Paul. "It is good for a man not to touch a woman . . . But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn" (I Cor., Ch. 7). This attitude accounts in part for the strong neurotic and masochistic strain in Christianity.

Jesus believed that the Last Judgment was at hand. "Verily I say unto you, ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel until the Son of Man become" (Matt., Ch. 10). "There be some standing here that shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Matt., Ch. 16). "This generation shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled" (Matt., Ch. 24). "The kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark, Ch. 1).

Jesus's moral teaching was therefore directed mainly towards getting believers into heaven: he showed little concern for the affairs of this world. Later, the Church ceased to believe that the end of the world was imminent, but it still held that this life was no more than a momentary prelude to eternity, and of little importance except as a preparation for the life to come. Thus throughout most of its history the Church has been indifferent to social progress and social reform. It has encouraged its members to regard suffering and misery as part of the inscrutable decrees of Providence; to be patient under wrong and oppression; to accept evil instead of resisting it: all in the certainty that things would be put right in the next world. To a privileged minority this attitude has obvious advantages, in that it helps to keep the unprivileged majority resigned to their lot, but it has retarded human progress for centuries. The emancipation of slaves and of women, and factory reform in the nineteenth century are three progressive struggles which the laity waged themselves with little or no support from the clergy.

### **Slavery**

There is no justification for the common claim that Christianity was responsible for the abolition of slavery. The Negro slave trade - a far more infamous practice than slavery in the ancient world - was initiated, carried on and defended by Christian men in Christian countries. To quote H. A. L. Fisher, "It is a terrible commentary on Christian civilisation that the longest period of slave-raiding known to history was initiated by the action of Spain and Portugal, France, Holland and Britain, after the Christian faith had for more than a thousand years been the established religion of Europe" (*History of Europe*, Ch. 23).

The abolitionist movement took its impetus, not from Christianity which had condoned slavery for centuries, but from the secular humanitarianism of the Enlightenment. Many of the leading abolitionists were unbelievers - Condorcet and other leading figures of the Revolution in France, Abraham Lincoln in America, Fox and Pitt in Great Britain. Christians like William Wilberforce who actively opposed the slave trade were far from typical: with the honourable exception of the Quakers, the attitude of most of the Churches towards abolition was in America actively hostile, and in Britain (to use Wilberforce's own words) "shamefully lukewarm". The Churches, of course, had no difficulty in citing scriptural authority for their attitude. The Old Testament sanctions slavery (cf. Leviticus, Ch. 25, 44-46); the New Testament contains no condemnation of it; and St. Paul told slaves to obey their masters (Colossians, Ch. 3, 22). (The Greek word for slave, *doulos*, is wrongly translated in the New Testament as "servant.")

## **The Establishment**

The indictment against Christianity is formidable: and when Christians today grow indignant about obscurantism, intolerance and ideological persecution in Communist countries, they would do well to remember that the Church in the ages of faith had a far worse record. This is not to deny that the Church has also done some good; so, too, has Communism. But the crucial fact, surely, is that, as Voltaire remarked, men who believe absurdities will commit atrocities. One of the best ways to improve men's behaviour is to enlighten their minds: and today, against the strong opposition of the Church and the Establishment, Scientific Humanism is attempting to do just that.