

The Finality of Christianity [Version 2]<sup>1</sup>

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When Strauss published his famous *Life of Jesus* in 1835, the whole body of Christian Theologians was stirred to its very depths.<sup>2</sup> To think that a man should dare to think, much less to give utterance to the idea that Christianity is based upon mythology, and that the New Testament stories are nothing more-or-less than a collection of myths and legends, this brought forth all the fear, all the indignation, all the wrath, all the vindictive vituperation of which the Christian Church has been capable. Since that time, and even before, the church has been conducting a sullen, defiant and hopeless retreat before the movement of modern life. With fear and trembling the adherents to a religion of authority have watched the fearless critic and scientific historian dissect and analyze, and sift the history of the church, the Old Testament, the creeds, the doctrines, one after another. But they held fast to the conviction that no man within the church, and in the interests of Christianity and religion itself, would dare to approach the citadel of the New Testament, and subject the Gospels to the same keen searching analysis that had been applied to the books. Yet for a hundred years this has been going on.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the manuscripts left by Earl Clement Davis there were two very similar texts, "The Finality of the Christian Religion" and "The Finality of the Christianity." Both were connected to—perhaps prompted by—the book by Professor George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*. The transcribed text that follows I have somewhat arbitrarily labeled "version 2." As opposed to "version 1," which reads more like a book report or review, this text, "version 2," reads as a more digested set of remarks that are prompted by Foster's book.

<sup>2</sup> David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) published *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* in 1835-6, initially translated by George Eliot in 1846 as *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 3 volumes.

This book of Prof. Foster's, *The Finality of Christianity*, is one of the important results of this hundred years of work.<sup>3</sup> Its significance rests not alone in the fact that it stands fairly and squarely upon the religious platform of the modern world, and modern thought, but also that Prof. Foster represents the spirit of teaching and training of the large University of Chicago, and is identified with one of the largest and most conservative of orthodox protestant bodies of Christians.

Realizing full well the momentousness of this situation, and the real issue which is at stake in the present day controversy in theology, he subjects the principles of the conflicting tendencies to scholarly, and keen analysis, and then submits his own position for consideration, starting as frankly as possible that his thesis is "Religion without supernaturalism, and science without naturalism."<sup>4</sup> He examines the system of Christianity which bases its claims to absoluteness and finality upon the external objects of faith, such as miracles, the Deity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, the authority of the creeds, the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the atonement, and concludes this examination by declaring that all these things have passed forever from the religious conceptions of the modern world. The Bible, the creeds, the doctrines of the Ecclesiasticism are the products of religious faith, and as such cannot be the causal *sine qua non* of the religious life. If Christianity is just this supernatural religion, and nothing more, then Christianity is passing from our life, never to return, and all claims to belong to the Christian body are excluded from the life of the modern man.

In this new world there is no room for the theory of Christianity's exclusive supernaturalness, over against which is ... not God's work but man's; for in this new world the opposition of human and

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<sup>3</sup> George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906.

<sup>4</sup> George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 199.

divine is overcome, and all is human and all is divine at one and the same time.<sup>5</sup>

All this system is based on the primacy of intellect in man. "It is the standpoint of view of salvation by knowledge, common to orthodoxy and rationalism, to neo-Platonism and Buddhism, to Thomas Aquinas and Hegel." ... But in the new world "there is nothing good save the good will."<sup>6</sup>

Primacy of the intellect in man; the ascetic-contemplative life the highest life; knowledge the chief good; dogma, or "sound doctrine," the essence of Christianity and the content of revelation, such content guaranteed by infallibility of Pope or Book, whose credentials are necessarily miraculous; saving faith, first of all holding things to be true because Pope or Book says so, the finality of the Christian Religion consisting in the miraculously authenticated divinity of its doctrines—this is all this is of a piece, and it all fits into the old Graeco-Roman and medieval world, with its static cosmology, and its static Empire and hierarchy over the spirit. The primacy of the will in man; the practical-moral life the highest life; character, the chief good; ideals the essence of the Christian religion and the content of revelation, which latter in the history of great souls and the soul of history; ideals valued teleologically and not causally; faith, not assent, but moral action; the finality of the Christian religion in its ideals—this, too, is all of a piece and fits into the modern dynamic and biological world.<sup>7</sup>

Supernaturalism in religion and Christianity, if it is in essence based on supernaturalism, is gone. But in the great

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<sup>5</sup> George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 187.

<sup>7</sup> George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, p. 189.

humanistic movement of which this overthrow of authority-religion is one result, and the re-establishment of man in the world is another, the prime question before the world today is whether this re-established man shall be merely a man of sense or shall he be a man of spiritual power. Here we come to face the great problem of materialistic naturalism, wherein the high spiritual developments of man are reduced to the level of natural causes alone. The disintegrating, demoralizing effect of the system of thought which declares that we are what we are as a result of the sole action of mechanical laws which have produced us, without giving place for the spontaneous action of a free personality, is as much to be feared as the equally demoralizing supernaturalism. The conflict between religion and science has been rather a conflict between supernaturalism and science, and science has been the victorious party. But owing to the fact that the defenders of religion have staked their whole claim of Christianity upon the supernatural authority of Christianity, the natural result is following, viz., that with the overthrow of supernaturalism, the overthrow of Christianity has been taken for granted. To unrest the Christian from the decaying structure of supernaturalism, and maintain its integrity and validity against the dogmatic assertions of materialistic dogmatism is our present problem in the interest of a richer, deeper life for man. This takes us back to the historical sources of Christianity, as found in the New Testament.

The question immediately arises as to what the essence of Christianity is. Is it that which is common to all the various Christian groups? Is it the teaching of any one of these groups? Is it the teaching of the New Testament? Is it the teaching of anyone of the Gospels, or any portion of the Gospels? Or indeed is there any essence to it at all?

Difficulties arise as soon as this question presents itself, for when we come to the New Testament, we find there a variety of opinions, a conglomeration of tradition, myth, legend and superimposed statements, made in the interests of propaganda, by men who wrote from 40 or 70 years after the alleged events are said to have occurred. There is not one word in the four Gospels that we can say with certainty was ever uttered by Jesus. These New

Testament narratives which are the sources of all our historical knowledge about Jesus, are records of opinions about events. At best they represent the second-hand translated records of the impressions that the life of a man made upon the people, and the successors of the people who gathered about him. When we come to find our way through this mass of material, which is clearly the accumulations of followers and not the deposit of Jesus himself, we find it very difficult to find a common ground upon which to stand with Jesus.

If we seek to affiliate ourselves to him on the basis of the acceptance of his teaching, we shall find that we have to part company with him at once. He believed in angels and demons, which we do not. He believed in a personal Divine which we do not. He believed in miracles which we do not. He believed in the peculiar doctrine of the Kingdom of Heaven such as the Adventists of today believe in, we do not. He [believed in] the doctrine of the messiahship which we do not. In short, he was the child of his own time, sharing with them the conceptions of the world, and the relations of man to the world which we have outgrown. Here we can find no common ground with Jesus. If his contrivance of religious supremacy depended upon such truths and teachings we should have to leave him behind.

Should we seek a common moral ground with him, it would be difficult. Many of the moral problems of today receive no treatment at his hands. He has nothing to say upon the subjects which are among the most pressing in modern life. Indeed all these attempts to seek an intellectual companionship, based upon likeness of ideas, all the modern attempts to find shelter in a Bible Christianity, are but survivals of the old supernaturalism. The things that he said, the thoughts that he expressed, the doctrines that he preached, these are not the abiding, but the transient, in his life. Not in spite of the fact that we do not believe as he did, or do not accept his specific teachings as true, but because of this diversity of opinion we come nearer to the man who lived 1900 years ago, and left such a tremendous impression upon the people. The foundation of Christianity is Jesus, but the essence of the life of Jesus is not in words or deeds, as such, not in alleged miracles, or claims to messiahship, but in the personality of the man

who said the things and did the deeds, and about whom the myths and legends collected.

Here he finds, and we find, the basis of our faith. Not in word, not in deed, not in doctrine, not in any external objective of faith, but in the welling up within us of the spontaneous power of personality, that power which is the culmination of our life, that expresses itself in the ceaseless activities of man. Jesus' significance as a religious leader is found in this that those powers of love, those deep human sympathies, those eternal hopes, the great expounding power of love and human fellowship, these inner things of the spiritual personality he made the basis of his regulating principle of life. When he faced the mystery of the world, the mystery of life, of growth, of self-consciousness, of love, of hope, of aspiration, when he faced the eternal mystery which we call God, he felt his relationship to this mystery, felt its all-penetrating power, felt his dependence upon it, and said, "Father." Out of this soul of Jesus, this soul purified by living in the very presence of the unseen, absorbing its power, absorbing its richness and dynamic, poured forth words of love and deeds of tenderness, just as the power of life in nature is bursting into leaf and flower. The leaf and flower fade, but the spirit of life is abiding.

The word and deed of Jesus may pass away, as the changing seasons of man succeed each other, but the spirit of his life, the power of his personality, the soul drinking and absorbing the spirit of God the Father, and transforming it into human kindness, and human love, this is eternal, and abiding. In this rests the finality of the religion of Jesus. Not the quantity of his speculative truth, not indeed the infallibility of his utterance, but strong noble free power of his personality, willing to do the will of God, the Father.

Thus we arrive at the essential power of the son of Joseph and Mary who has left such an imprint upon the history of the world. Christianity, the religion of which he is the founder, becomes not a religion of a book, not a religion of a creed, not a religion of doctrine, not a religion of texts, and sayings of Jesus, but a religion of personality. The external objects of faith do not exist.

The religious faith is inward, and expresses its inward power by stamping the world with its imprint. So Christianity is a religion in which we are religious, not because we read a bible, but we write a bible because of the inner power of our personality. We are not the doers of good deeds, and the lovers of the noble life, not because some book or clericus or what not tell us to, but because we are dominated by the power of some ideal.

This religion of personality, this religion of Jesus, this true Christianity, is replacing the crumbling structure of supernaturalism, and supplementing and giving life to [the] mechanical impersonal system of materialistic naturalism in our modern life.

As we face the problems before us, the problems of good and evil, the problems of life and death, the problems of moral and social life, our great hope is not that man, be that man Jesus or another, is like God, but much rather that God is like man. Could we know that the great infinite power of the world in which we live, the source of all our power, our strength, our love, our aspiration, be like the tender loving forgiving Jesus of Nazareth, our life would be freed from all its doubting uncertainties. This was the religious faith of Jesus. The well-spring of his life. This is and must be our religious faith, the well-spring of our life. Through fellowship with Jesus, our fellowship in Christianity is in no way determined by our assent or dissent of the dogmas of ecclesiasticism, nor by our assent to or dissent from the teachings of Jesus. Our fellowship with Jesus, our fellowship in Christianity is determined by the extent to which the spirit, the standpoint of our life is like the spirit the standpoint of his life. The disposition which Jesus had in his world we should have in ours, viz., the will to follow as of the righteous and noble life in which the rule of love shall be supreme. This at least is the religion of Jesus, and if Christianity is the religion of Jesus, and not a religion about Jesus, then Christianity must be a religion of personality. Its finality is not exclusive, indeed it is not at all quantitative, but it is qualitative. It is the way by which men may enter into the richest and deepest experiences of life, and face the hardest problems, the deepest sorrows, the most cruel disappointments with the calm and resolution

that characterized what we know of the life, and the death  
of Jesus of Nazareth.