

THE CHRISTIAN ETHIC IN A NEW WORLD

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The title of this talk was not chosen by me. I must say that I am not very happy about the terminology used. On the one hand, the word 'ethics' above all else evokes the idea of an intellectual discipline, being linked with philosophy and sociology. It is systematized morality. But for us who call ourselves Christians, it is not a question of moral theories, but that of the message of the divine Revelation, of the message of the Gospel. On the other hand, if we talk of a new world, of a world in change, I have doubts about the reality of this change. I think that the world has not essentially changed. Basically, men are the same as they were in the time of Christ, with the same instincts, good and evil. What has changed, however, is the means, which are more and more effective, and which science and technology have laid at the service of these instincts. I would like to present the question of change and newness in specifically Christian terms. Concerning this specifically Christian point of view, I would say that what is of import in this regard, is not the scientific or technical changes which influence the world, but it is rather the inner change, the spiritual renewal of man. In my opinion, the new man is not the man of the year 1965, but the man who believes in the Gospel, and who tries to act in conformity with the Gospel, regardless of the century in which he may find himself. Now, for this new man in Christ, the question is not to accomplish some adaptations, some readjustments, on this or that point. Rather it implies, and for that matter at every moment, becoming a radically new creature, confronting the world and all possible situations with a new outlook and a new spirit. To those who would say that modern life brings with it a revolution as far as moral values are concerned, to these persons I should reply that this revolution is very meagre in comparison with the total and continuous overturning which adherence to the Lord Jesus implies. It is these, in this adherence and its consequences, that we find the true revolution. The name of maximal revolution is: Conversion.

In the modern world, we cannot talk about moral action without meeting existentialism. It is a new name for quite an old attitude. Leaving aside certain Christian existentialists, we find that the existentialists reject the idea of a basic and eternal morality. They deny all moral laws. They declare that in each case, it is the conditions of concrete existence, the circumstances of the moment, alone, that should regulate our actions. It is obvious that such a principle is strictly contradictory to the Gospel, to the apostolic tradition and the teaching of the Church. The words 'law,' 'commandment,' 'obligation,' are unpopular in these days. But the Lord Jesus has declared that not a single iota of the law would pass away. By law he meant both this unwritten law which nevertheless is present to universal conscience, even the conscience of pagans, and the written law contained in Scripture. As Orthodox Christians, we maintain that divine law is just, good and holy, and that we have to obey it. But is not this principle of faithfulness to the law contrary to what I just said about the constantly innovating, revolutionary character of the message of the Gospel? Is this not a static immobile position, void of dynamism and actuality? I would answer: There is nothing which is more dynamic,

more alive than the law of God.

In fact, think just now of the material writing of the law. Think, rather, of its essence, of its profound reality. The Lord Jesus respected the law, he was the supreme servant of the Law, because he saw in it the living and personal will of the Father. Through the law, He served and loved the Father. For Him, Jesus, the Law subsisted in the person of the Father, and was, at the same time, abolished as a text, because the life itself of the Father became substituted to the law, and the light replaced the reflection or the image. The same holds true of the relation between the law and the person of Christ. Remember what Saint Paul said about Christ, who is the end of the law. In Jesus Christ, a living person has taken the place of the law. The Decalogue itself as law has been abolished. If the Christian no longer kills, or commits adultery; it is not because certain sentences were written on tablets of stone, but because Jesus Christ has lived and died in a certain way. All that was law, continues to exist, though in a different form. Think of the river that pours into the sea. Each drop of the river will continue to exist within the sea, and yet the river as such is no more. Or suppose you have a certain distance to cover. You could cover it either by advancing step by step or in a leap. In the latter case, your feet have not touched the ground and yet you have covered all the distance. The living union with the Lord is a law no more, but nevertheless is the fullness of the law.

In our moral actions, we are not bound by hard and fast formulas. We are linked to the will of God: 'Thy will be done.' But we should distinguish the stone from the wind. The stone or nucleus is the good eternally willed by God. The bark or rind is the forms of accomplishing this divine will. These forms may very well change. But they are of secondary importance. What should continue to be, however, and that should not change, is our sincere and profound intent to do that which God wants. But, and here is the bit of truth in existentialism, once given it, we must take into account the situation as it is. In the world of the spirit, the same circumstances never recur. There are never two individual cases that are identical. This does not give us the right to say: 'To each one according to his truth.' We cannot and we should not bend principles according to what we choose. But while safeguarding the principle we should, in the concrete application of things, have much prudence and love. It may be that what, objectively, is wrong contrary to the general will of God, may sometimes become, for an erroneous or unenlightened conscience, good in a certain subjective sense. If a man acts according to his conscience, according to the measure of light given to him, in certain cases, though materially doing wrong, he will not be guilty and God will be able and willing to let some good come out from evil. Here we are no more in the realm of morality but rather of the pastorals, of the spiritual clinic, wherein one should know how to combine the most clear vision of the goal to be achieved, and the greatest flexibility in the means of reaching the goal. The Orthodox Church guides us an example in this respect. She proclaims certain principles, and yet at the same time, she avoids entering into unnecessary details; she is always ready to pay considerate and compassionate attention to difficult individual cases.

I turn now to the central point. How does this requirement of newness of which I spoke in relation to the moral action of a Christian, how does it manifest itself? The answer lies in a very short sentence: It is a question of going beyond, surpassing. Remember the two sentences of the Gospel: "You have heard that it

was said, but I say unto you...what more are you doing than other?" The message of the Gospel shatters the bounds which have been received, and those strict demarcations. It calls us to go beyond. I shall give some practical instances.

Let us take, for example, the problem of human rights. The Gospel does not include a declaration of the rights of man, but Saint Paul writes a letter to Philemon over the matter of a fugitive slave, Onesimus. Paul sends Onesimus back to his master without entering into complications about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of slavery. What is important here, for Paul, is that Philemon should receive Onesimus as a brother. Paul has considered the question 'in terms of Christ.'

Let us take the economic problem. The Gospel makes no pronouncement on the question of the extent to which possessions are allowed. But the Lord Jesus says that to him who takes our coat we should give him our cloak also, and the Book of Acts shows us the brethren of the Church in Jerusalem having all things in common. Even here, the question is presented in terms of Christ, quite far from capitalism and Marxism.

Let us now turn to the problems of sex. Of them, Jesus says very little in the Gospel. But in this point his attitude goes beyond and above the existing and apparently opposite views. On the one hand, he refuses to condemn the adulterous woman. On the other hand, he declares that he who looks at a woman lustfully, has already committed adultery with her in his heart. He is present at the wedding in Cana. He also says that there are not only those who are born eunuchs, or made eunuchs by men, but that there are those who have made themselves eunuchs willingly, for his sake and for the sake of the Gospel. And he adds: "Let him who can do it, do it." I am persuaded that on topics such as fornication, homosexuality, birth control, divorce, he would say things which would go beyond these positions that are called conservative and those called progressive. With a luminous clarity, he would affirm that the end of sexual life is neither a merely biological growth of the human species, nor the psycho-physiological fusion of two beings, nor the gratification of blind and selfish desires, but rather that this end is participation in the creative act of the Father, by preparing potential future members of the Kingdom of God, and the establishment of a supernatural communion, by grace, between man and woman. St. Paul briefly spoke of fornication. He does not treat it from the moral point of view. He only says: 'Shall you take a member of Christ and make him a member of a prostitute?' Paul puts the question 'in terms of Christ.'

Let us take the problems of war, peace, violence and non-aggression. The Gospel formulates no theory of international law. But Jesus told Peter to put back his sword into its sheath. The one who was struck on the right cheek, he asks him to turn the left also. He was the supreme objector of conscience. Until the 4th century, the Church as a whole has condemned resort to weapons. Many Christians were martyred for the refusal to enlist in military service. After Constantine, the Church has blessed armies and wars, even though St. Basil denied the sacraments for three years to all soldiers who had fought even wars which were 'just.' One of our present duties certainly is to reconsider this problem and to compare the attitude of the majority of Christian confessions with all the radical and transcendent 'going beyond' of the primitive Church.

We can neither renew the world nor put forward questions ‘in terms of Christ,’ unless we ourselves have been *changed*. The Gospel remains ever new, newer than any reformist doctrine, because no reformation demands of us as profound a reform as does the Gospel. The Gospel is eternally fresh, eternally new. It speaks of seed, growth and harvest; it is the springtime of the soul. It is the Good News. But is it really so for us? Is it still news for us, a gladsome proclamation of healing, of pardon, an impetus of hope, a ‘going beyond’? Is it new for us every day, each morning? This presupposes conversion. It means new birth – birth of water (purification and repentance) and of the Spirit (offering ourselves to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit). This, then, means the death of the old man and the making of a new man who is completely different and sees things with a new outlook. The Lord Jesus repeats, even at this very minute, to each one of us, the words which he spoke to Nicodemus: “Verily, verily I say unto you: unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”