

Questions from the Crusades

The Crusades are part of a long and dreadful story of Christian zeal and the oppression of others. Like all important stories, it mixes together themes of devotion/heroism, and themes of meanness/selfishness. What interests me is the motivation behind them, particularly the motives of the men of the Church who “preached the Crusades”, and who therefore had to think out the implications.

*“Unless a man be born again by water and the Holy Spirit,
he cannot enter the Kingdom of God”*

These uncompromising words may seem to be a charter for the most urgent kind of missionary activity, and so they were taken by Christians of many generations. It seemed to be of eternal life-and-death importance, not only that people should be taught to believe in Christ, but particularly that they should be baptised. So sure were these zealous souls that the condition laid down by the Lord must be fulfilled to the letter, that many people were *forcibly baptized* for their own good. It also followed that a missionary’s care of orphans and displaced children would automatically begin with their baptism. It was regarded as fatally damaging for any human being to die without having received the sacraments; and therefore the Church inspired the great movements of military expedition to carry the Gospel and redeem the world.

By the sixteenth century this movement had become a pretty thin veneer for the cruellest instances of colonizing arrogance, with the *conquistadores* enslaving, or even “ethnically cleansing”, the indigenous peoples and cultures of South America. The Church’s part in this story is far from edifying. The Jesuit ideal of *accommodation*, whereby local cultures and customs could be arrogated to the Christian missionary’s programme and incorporated in the Christian way of life of the mission, is of venerable antiquity; in some sense we can already see it in Paul’s different approaches to Jewish and to Gentile converts to Christianity; Gregory the Great famously rethought his attitude to pagan England, and encouraged his missionary, Augustine, to recruit pagan festivals and temples into the consolidation of a firmly-rooted local Christian life. Nonetheless, this humane and wise practice has been regularly attacked as a form of *syncretism*, watering-down the Christian church by admixture of paganism. Often Christianity has been equated with the cultural forms of a quite narrow sector of the Church (for instance, the culture of the Diocese of

Rome), to the extent that all who deviate from Roman practice are seen as deviating from Christ.

What are the boundaries of salvation? We can't help asking what provision God makes for the salvation of his human creation. Is it, for instance, possible for a caveman to be saved, living ten centuries before Abraham? If the principle obtains that he must be *baptised by water and the Holy Spirit*, it would appear not. But is God tied to the boundaries created by the sacraments? Did the *privative* voicing (*Unless...he cannot*) come from God, or from the evangelist, writing in a specific time and place? Perhaps we could say that, *presented with the choice*, and with all else being equal, it is indeed possible that a man might damn himself by *refusing Christ*. But what if he is never offered such a choice? Or if he is brought up in such a way that he could never contemplate such a choice? Coming into our own world, do we have to consign the devout Buddhist or Hindu to an alternative fate because, being unbaptized, *he cannot enter the Kingdom of God*? What about the unborn? The stillborn child is past baptising - the sacraments are for the living. Does that mean that human salvation is confined to those who flourish long enough to receive the sacraments?

Understanding the Word of God

Any theological thinker will smell a rat here. We should remember an old, good principle, that if our conclusions about God make him less compassionate than we are, there is something wrong! A principle which may form good pastoral policy may be very bad theology if it is predicated of God; baptism and Christian conversion are excellent and urgent pastoral priorities; but they do not delimit the tenderness of God for his creation.

What do we say about people of other faiths?

"The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women. Yet it proclaims, and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 1:6). In him God reconciled all things in himself (2Cor 5:18-19); in him, people can find the fullness of religious life." - *2nd Vatican Council, Decree on non-Christian religions*

The uniqueness of Jesus Christ

People who are anxious about non-Christians and their eternal salvation ought to remember the uniqueness of Jesus. He is not "one among many" human teachers who have inspired

others to search for God. He does not come to claim that he has a good way to get there. Rather he reveals himself to us as *Son of God*.

This must make it clear that a Buddhist who arrives before the face of God arrives in the presence of Jesus. There is not an alternative Buddhist heaven built on Buddhist lines, any more than there is a heaven built on Christian lines. We believe in one God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Whoever comes to look upon him will see him as he is.

Our own understanding of God, in human terms, is pretty faulty. Our mind is formally inadequate to the task of comprehending God, because he is categorically greater than our mind at its greatest. He understands us, but we do not, cannot, comprehend him. But in our confession of Jesus as Son of God, we can say that we love him and worship him as he is; and that is the appropriate response. So our insistence on forms of words, theologies, articles of faith and the like have comparatively limited meaning. The worship of Jesus Christ, however, is our true act of faith.

In this sense we may be much closer than we think to those of other faiths. Our creeds may not coincide, but our obedience, our search for holiness, and our prayer may be very close. It is here that the eye of God, which looks not at appearances, but at the heart, may see the face of Christ in these people made in his image. We should never make of our blessings, in knowing Christ, a barrier between him (for he is alive in his Church) and them.