

RELIGION AND THE GOSPELS: FACT OR FICTION?

Albert P. Holden

IN our first booklet, 'God and Immortality, Truths or Myths', we proved that there is a God, Who is the Creator and Ruler of all things, and that the masterpiece of His visible Creation, the human soul, is destined to exist for all eternity. In other words, God created man and planned for him a destiny which far surpasses that of the rest of the material creation.

God, as we know, is Supremely Intelligent and everything that He made was for some purpose. There is nothing around us in the world that does not serve some use. Plant and animal life exist because they serve man's need. What about man himself? Are we to believe that the one creature which ranks higher than any other in this world is the one without any visible purpose? Can we, for one moment, suppose that God created man, endowed him with an immortal soul, promised him an eternal destiny, and yet left him on this earth without a purpose to serve? Such a supposition, our reason tells us, is absurd. Why should the rest of creation have a purpose and man have none? If, then, there is a purpose behind our lives, it is our duty to discover what it is..

Can you, for one moment, imagine anyone buying a delicate machine for the purpose of repairing watches and using it to repair shoes or suchlike? When we buy an instrument we do so because we know the purpose it is intended to serve, and that if we use it in any other way we shall, in the end, ruin it completely.

Unless we know the reason for which we were created we cannot use ourselves successfully. For us to live our lives successfully and intelligently it is essential that we should know the purpose of life. We cannot tell if we are directing this life in the way we should unless we know the true direction it should take. No problem is more important than this one, and no man in his right senses can overlook or neglect it,

We have proved that we are not here as the result of an accident. If we were put on this earth with a purpose, our first and most important task is to find out what it is. God alone, since He made us, can give us a true solution to the problem of life. Therefore, it is our object to see if we can ascertain, unaided, the object of life, and if we are unable to do it of our own accord, to see if God has ever, in any way at all, told us what that object is.

Where is the solution to this problem of life to be found? The answer is, in Religion. It is this which shows us our correct attitude not only towards life but towards its Creator.

Not only is Religion of vital importance towards the right living of this life, but it is of the utmost importance with regard to the eternal destiny of the soul. We know that one day we must die, and, as reasonable creatures, we want to know what happens to us after death. It is Religion alone that can answer this question. From this it follows that it is the duty of all reasonable men to study the subject of Religion.

The man who lightly passes it over is ignoring a fact which is universally bound up with man's existence. Not only universal as regards place, for there is nowhere under the sun that has not some form of worship, but also universal in point of time. From the earliest dawn of history the story of mankind is also the story of Religion. Long before the Christian era, Religion existed. It cannot be ignored by any serious-minded person.

What then is Religion? The answer to that is not very difficult. It is nothing more nor less than the outward expression of man's rational attitude towards God.

In proving the existence of God we did so by use of reason alone. In the case of the Immortality of the Soul, we again used our reason as far as it would take us, but found that though the proofs we used were wonderfully strong in their appeal, yet they were not absolutely conclusive. It needed Revelation to complete them, i.e., to give us assurance that God would not annihilate the soul. So, too, with this question of Religion, we shall use our reason as far as possible to show that man has duties towards God, and then see if it is possible for us to arrive at a clear and concise explanation of them, or whether it is necessary that they should be explained by God Himself.

Now, Religion is twofold, Natural and Revealed. First of all, we must examine Natural Religion. By the use of reason man is convinced that he has duties towards God, and that he must serve Him. Further, he knows that he has duties not only towards his fellow men but also to himself. That is what we call Natural Religion. It is, in a word, the explanation of the purpose of life as far as it can be ascertained by the light of unaided reason.

We start off with the fact that because God exists, man has a duty towards Him. This is not difficult to prove. Immediately I become conscious of anyone's existence I, automatically, contract some-kind of obligation towards him. This obligation may be very remote, but nevertheless it exists. For example, if a man enters the railway carriage in which I am travelling I am bound to see that he has the room to which his ticket entitles him. If, he, though an absolute stranger, asks me a civil question I am bound to give him a civil answer. These things are governed by ordinary politeness and I am lacking in a natural virtue if I fail to observe them.

The more I come into contact with people the stronger does this obligation towards, them become. The people with whom I work, for example, have certain claims on me. I cannot ignore them. I am bound in Justice, and Charity to consider their rights and privileges. If I were not sociable and considerate to them I should certainly be lacking in my duty.

Stronger still becomes this obligation when we consider the relationship which exists between child and parent. The child realises that to its parents it owes everything. They have given it life. They have loved it and provided for its every need. Reason dictates that it is the highest human duty to show to our parents love, reverence and obedience. Anyone despising these duties is rightly considered inhuman, and condemned by all.

Yes, strong as these feelings are, and strong as are the claims of parents, they are but a mere shadow of man's attitude towards God. For, after all, a man's parents are not God. They acted only under the guidance of the Creator. By developing the arguments for the existence of God, we can prove quite easily that He, the First Cause, Himself uncaused, must be infinite in being and infinite in every perfection. He is Justice, Truth, Holiness and Knowledge. Easy also to show that from Him all things proceed, by Him all things are maintained in being, on Him all things depend. It is God, and God alone Who has given man existence and to Whom he owes all his powers. Therefore, since we are conscious of God's existence, and since we owe so much to Him, we have great obligations towards Him.

Let us examine these duties. First of all, we will take the individual as such. It is true to say that, by the use of reason alone, man realises his obligations towards his Creator. He knows that God is a Being of Supreme Intelligence, and that to Him he owes not only his existence but its preservation every minute of the day. But that is not all. To God he owes the wonderful faculties which place him above the rest of the material creation. But even these gifts would be useless without Divine aid and co-operation. Every thought of our minds, every glance of our eye is possible only because God wills it. We could not so much as raise our little finger without Divine aid. Again, man's reason tells him that God has planted in his, soul a sense of right and wrong which gives him the certain hope that a good life, lived in accordance with Divine Commands, will bring him great happiness, not only now but for all eternity.

By using his reason, therefore, man perceives that he is infinitely inferior to God and that for everything he is dependent on Him. He is forced to acknowledge God's Supreme Excellence and to regard Him as His Creator, Preserver and Ruler. This means that he is bound to thank Him for His goodness and to pray to Him for his needs. Further, since He is the source of all perfection he must honour him, and he must also obey Him as Master. In a word, from the use of reason, man realises that he must serve and adore God, that is, that he must profess Religion.

So far we have dealt with the attitude of the individual towards God. Let us continue our investigation a step further. Not only individuals but Society as a whole has this same duty towards God. A Society is nothing more than a group of individuals united for a common purpose under a common authority. The family is a society for the upbringing of children under the authority of their parents. The state is nothing more nor less than a collection of families united under one government for the welfare of all. Both these institutions are necessary to man. The family, since to it he owes his very life; and the state, since it is essential for his temporal well being and development. Since then, Society, either under the form of the family or the state, is essential to man, it follows that it is, of its very nature, a Divine institution. In other words, it is a creature of God. Like the individual, it is indebted to Him for its existence, preservation and the benefits it receives. Therefore, it resembles a living person and, equally, as such, owes duties to God and is under an obligation to discharge them.

So we see that not only as individuals, but collectively, man knows that God has claims on him. The duties of Natural Religion, however, besides governing our attitude towards God also determine our attitude towards ourselves and our neighbour. For, if God gave man life and wonderful faculties He did so that these things might be used fittingly and not in any way abused. That means that we are bound to exercise reasonable care of our lives and to live

in a manner befitting our Divine origin and destiny. Also, since man of his very nature, finds social life a necessity, he must observe those virtues of truthfulness, justice, charity and obedience to lawful authority which are essential to human society.

We have examined the tenets of Natural Religion and shown that they are fully binding on all men. In so doing we must admit that we have had a tremendous advantage. We already knew these principles through Revelation. For we must remember that these chief duties of man are all found in the Ten Commandments, and we set about solving a problem of which we already knew the answer.

So we must ask ourselves, would it be possible for us to come to so perfect a knowledge of these truths if we had not the aid of Revelation? Would it be true, to say that without Revelation man would be unable to understand clearly the duties of Natural Religion?

Absolutely speaking, it would not be impossible for unaided reason to acquire a sound knowledge of man's principal duties, at least in their essential outlines, but at best such knowledge could be acquired only by the very few . . . men of great genius, unbiased minds, and ample leisure. Historically, we know that even these few did not exist.

Amongst the ancient people, with the exception of the Jews, the grossest errors prevailed: For most men there was not one God but many. These gods were conflicting elements. Some of them were patrons of good, others of evil. Even such great philosophers as Aristotle, though acknowledging His Existence, did not recognise God as the Creator. In the sphere of worship, too, there were grave inaccuracies; some forms were even so low as to be obscene. With such notions as these it was impossible for them to have a fixed standard of right and wrong. True, there was a vague idea of a life after death but the notions of the form it would take were greatly at variance. In their attitude towards themselves and their fellowmen there was no idea of the dignity of man or of brotherhood.

The study of the general character of religion and morality amongst the pagans leads us to the conclusion that they were unable, of themselves, either as individuals or as a society, to arrive at a true notion of their duties towards God and their fellowmen.

Let us suppose, for a moment, that there had been some great philosopher who had been able to arrive at a true conception of these truths as we know them to-day. Remember that even though it is possible to know of God's existence and our responsibility to Him, through the use of reason, yet the truths of Natural Religion, dealing with the worship that He should receive and determining man's duties towards himself and his neighbour, depend on reasoning which would be attainable only by a man of great genius. Let us suppose, however, that such a man had existed, that he mastered these truths and devoted his life and energies to teaching them to his fellowmen. Allow that there was none to dispute his authority. Would his mission succeed? No! He must fail for the very lack of authority. He would be able to point to nothing higher than his own reasoning powers for the proofs of the truths which he taught. Men would not obey him unless it suited their convenience. A man who wished to sin would argue, "This is forbidden by one who, like myself, is liable to error, and we have no certainty that his reasoning is not false."

So, then, we see that man, unaided, could not possibly find out the purpose of his life on earth or the goal at which he is aiming. Are we, then, to conclude that man, king of the material creation, is to be the one creature that God has placed on this earth without a knowledge of the use he has to serve? Obviously such a suggestion is contrary to what we know of Divine Goodness and Wisdom. We are led to the assurance that, since man, unaided, could not arrive at a full knowledge of Religion and the Immortality of the Soul, God Himself would enlighten him. In other words, we are led to deduce that the necessity of a direct Revelation from God is evident from the unhappy state of man in relation to his knowledge of Natural Religion.

Our next step, therefore, must be to ascertain if God has actually communicated with mankind, but before doing this we should have some idea of what is meant by Revelation. Literally, this word means 'a drawing back of a veil.' In other words, a communication of truth made directly by God to man. There is no need for us to prove the fact that God could have made this revelation. Obviously He can communicate with men, since it was He Who gave them the power to communicate with one another.

If we examine our knowledge we realise that the greater part of it rests on the testimony of others. All that we know of ancient history, and most of what we know of topical events, rests, not on our own knowledge of such things, but on what we are told about them. We all know that America exists, but very few of us have been there. Even

though we have not seen it, we would be very foolish to deny that there is such a place. How many of us could calculate the earth's speed round the sun, or the speed at which light travels? Nevertheless we accept the answer to these problems from people we consider competent to make such calculations.

With regard to all the knowledge which rests on human testimony, it can be accepted as true provided that there is no possibility of wilful deception or if there is no chance of mistake. So, if we can find an authority from which these two possibilities of doubt have been removed, the statements made by that authority must be infallibly certain. This authority can be none other than God. Knowing that God is Infinitely Holy, we know that there could be no question of deception in any statement that He makes, whilst His Supreme Intelligence precludes the possibility of error. Once we can convince ourselves that God has spoken, we accept His word without doubt or criticism, even though it may be possible that what He has said is above our understanding.

If we examine the qualities which Revelation must possess, we see that since God is its Author it must be infallibly certain, since there can be no possibility of error. Since it has its foundation in the truth of God Himself, it is not subject to change. There must be no picking and choosing in what we believe. Either the whole is accepted or rejected. There is no possibility of a middle course. Then, it must deal with God, how we are to serve Him, and our obligations towards ourselves and our neighbour. Furthermore, since it is the Will of God that all men are to be saved, then His Revelation must be such that it can be easily found by all sorts and classes of men. Salvation has been promised not only to the learned and those who have the leisure to seek it out, but to all men, no matter how poor or illiterate. Again, if it is for all men, then God must have devised some means by which His message could be preserved in its integrity until the end of time. For, as long as there are men on the earth, salvation is to be available. Finally, since on it depends not only the right living of this life but also the determination of Man's everlasting destiny, it must be quite definite. If the following or rejection of it means either eternal happiness or everlasting misery, it would be most unjust of God not to make that Revelation clear and defined, but a necessity, if man is to follow the purpose God has mapped out for him in this world and to attain the end for which he is divinely destined, the next question for us to consider is: Has God made this Revelation to Mankind? Obviously, we cannot attempt to examine the credentials of other religions. We leave them to produce them for themselves whilst we devote our attention to the Religion which we profess. For it is this Religion which claims to possess the Revelation of God in its fullness and entirety.

Now, in order to prove that our Religion is that decreed by God it is necessary that we examine, first of all, its foundation and then pass on to examine whether its Founder was human or Divine.

The history of the foundation of our Religion is contained in the collection of books which we know as the New Testament. Of these, five are narratives, twenty-one are letters and one a book of prophecy. For our purpose we can confine ourselves to the first five books, since they tell the story of the foundation of Christianity; we can regard the letters and prophecies as support of the narrative.

It must be clear that we are not attempting to prove that these Books are the Inspired Word of God. Our purpose is to treat them from a human 'point of view and prove that they are trustworthy accounts of actual happenings. This is of great importance. There is a great deal of misunderstanding outside the Church with regard to our attitude towards the Gospels. "You Catholics," we are told, "argue in a vicious circle. You claim that yours is the Church of Christ because the New Testament says so, and then you claim that the New Testament is true because the Church says so."

Now this is not a correct statement of our position. If we were to prove the Authority of the Church from the Inspired Scriptures, and then the Scriptures from the Church, we should be guilty of the fallacy of the vicious circle. On the contrary, we do not in any way presuppose that the Books of the New Testament are inspired but only that they are a true historical record of actual people and events.

We use the New Testament to prove that the Church's claims were the same in the beginning as they are now, while the Church pledges her Divine Authority in support of the truth of the New Testament. Thus, both the New Testament and the Church depend on the Authority of Christ.

Therefore, it is not true to say that we argue in a vicious circle, for we are using the evidence- of two independent witnesses. It must also be noted that our Faith rests on the teaching of Christ handed down to us from the Apostles. All this teaching is not contained in the New Testament, and we use these books only when we have satisfied ourselves that they are a true account of what actually occurred.

How do we decide whether a book is reliable history or not? We do so by finding out if it is genuine, that is, if it is the work of the author to whom it is ascribed. Having done this, we examine if the author himself is trustworthy. In other words, if he is truthful and well-informed. Then, finally, it must be proved that it is intact, that is, that the text is substantially the same as when it left the author's hands.

Let us apply these tests to the New Testament. The Books of the Gospels were written in the latter half of the first century. The earliest manuscripts of them date back to a very remote period. There is a Syrian version which dates back to the second century, whilst there are others that date back to the fourth and fifth centuries. Now this is very significant when we consider that the earliest known manuscripts of Horace, Cicero and Plato date from the seventh and eighth centuries—and no one doubts that these latter are substantially the uncorrupted descendants of the originals. Why then do people doubt the integrity of the Gospels? The answer is that they contain A Divine Law which man must believe and follow, and that, to say the least, does not fit in with the ideas of the irreligious.

Since the manuscripts of the Gospels date so near to the originals it is manifestly impossible for them to have been re-written in that brief interval. The Church held them in great reverence. She was jealous in her care of them. So much so that she rejected and suppressed Gospels falsely ascribed to SS. Peter, Thomas and James. .

These apocryphal Gospels, which were everywhere denounced by her as non-apostolic, and spurious, fabulous and fantastic, imitations of the true Gospels, help to show the genuineness of the original four, as counterfeit coins prove the existence of the originals they imitate.

We are justified, therefore, in assuming that the New Testament is now substantially the same as when it was written.

There is also ample evidence to prove that these books are the genuine work of the writers to whom they are ascribed. The evidence of Christian and non-Christian writers of the first two centuries shows that the Gospels were widely known, studied and revered throughout the Christian World. Within a hundred years of the death of the Apostles they were in practical use all over the Church. Is it possible that the Apostles themselves, or their immediate successors, would have allowed a series of forgeries to be circulated as the history of their Master? Is it possible that the converts to Christianity,—and they included many Jews and Gentiles of high education and culture,—would have embraced a religion which demanded great sacrifices, in many cases that of Life itself, without first of all assuring themselves that its written documents were genuine? If they were not true, learned heretics and pagans would have spared no effort in attacking the sacred books of the Church, and they would have heaped ridicule on them if there had been any question of their genuineness.

Ask yourself, is it possible that the early Christians, who cheerfully gave their lives for the Faith, could have conspired to propagate, and accept, these books if they had in any way doubted their truth? We must accept the Gospels as the genuine work of the writers to whom they are ascribed.

In further support of the claim that the Gospels are genuine, we have numerous texts in the early writers. It is not possible, or necessary, to give them all.

Saint Justine of Samaria and Rome, who became a Christian in the year 130 A.D., says that the Gospels were written by the Apostles and Disciples and were read at the meetings of Christians on Sundays. (Apol. 1. 66, 67; Dial Tryph., n 103).

In the year 170 A.D. Tatian wrote his Diatesseron, or harmony on the four Gospels.

Saint Irenaeus writing in 180 A.D. says, "Mathew wrote a Gospel for the Jews in their own language while Peter and Paul were establishing the Church in Rome. After their departure, Mark also, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, handed down to us in writing the information which Peter had given. Luke, the follower of Paul, wrote out the Gospel which Paul used to preach. Later, John the disciple of Our Lord, who had reclined on His Breast, published his Gospel during his sojourn at Ephesus in Asia Minor." (Adversus Haereses, 111.1).

The last quotation is of special importance, for the writer, goes to the trouble to tell us the source of his information. He was, he tells us, the disciple of Saint Polycarp who was, himself, taught by St. John. Is it possible that he could have fallen into error on such vital matters?

If this is not sufficient proof that the Gospels were written by the Apostles, we have the internal evidence of the writings. To a student of the language and writings of the times, it is clear that the writers were Jews, and they used

the Jewish language and idioms of that time. The writers, must have been witnesses, or been told by eye-witnesses, of the events they narrate. If they had not been they could not have described so accurately the conditions, religious and political, which were in existence at the time of Christ. Just to quote one example: St. John writes of the "Probatina Pool", where the sick used to wait for an angel to disturb the waters, and he describes it as having "five porches". Such a thing had never been heard of, until recently when the foundations of such a pool were uncovered. There are numerous other referents, but what we have said must convince all but those who are stubbornly wedded to unbelief.

We are perfectly in order, then, in accepting the New Testament as a story of events that actually happened. Now such a story is one of two things, either it is history or it is fiction. Those who deny that the New Testament is a true historical record must hold that it is false, for there is no other alternative. But to claim that it is fiction implies a great deal. First of all, it means that the writers either invented the character of Christ or else their portrayal of Him is false. There is no other way out. For Christ lived and did the things recorded or He did not.

If then, the Gospels are false it means that four men got together and wrote a book which they knew to be untrue. It is a fact, however, that the four Gospels were written, not together but at different times. These four men produced a book which has never been surpassed for the beauty of its style and language—a book which not only greatly influenced the people of that particular age but which has revolutionized the whole of human society; which has had a greater influence on the history of the world than all the findings of the philosophers together; a book which has made the greatest sinners into Saints; which even today after two thousand years, is the guiding force of millions of lives. Is it possible that such a book could be a mere product of the imagination? Can we honestly believe that the foundation of Christianity rests on nothing more than a literary fraud?

Again, is it possible for these men to have invented the main character, Christ? We have our heroes of fiction but not one of them can be compared with that Central Figure of the Gospels. He is altogether sublime yet simple, so lovable, so noble, so tragic, so human, and yet so God-like that He is able to silence His enemies by that stupendous challenge "Which of you can conceive me of (i.e., charge me with) sin?" And, remember, they are silenced.

Further, let us turn to the men who wrote the Gospels. As we read their writings we are convinced of one thing, in order to produce a book so marvellous, which by far surpasses in beauty and power anything that has ever been written, they must have had exceptional powers. We naturally expect them to be men of great genius and outstanding ability. Never, we are forced to conclude, has there been anyone to equal them in the history of literature. Yet, such is far from the truth. Of the four who wrote there is only one, Luke, who has any claim to higher education. He was a physician. Even he, though he shows literary skill, in no way shows that dazzling genius that would be required to invent the Gospel story. Of the others, one was a tax-gatherer, one a simple fisherman and the other, one whose occupation cannot quite be determined. Most wonderful of all is the fact that the least educated, the simple fisherman, John, far surpasses them all. His contribution to the New Testament is so sublime that not any one of the greatest philosophers who has ever lived has produced anything that can, even remotely, be compared to it. When we read the Gospel of St. John, with its lofty theology of the Incarnation, we know that it could not possibly be the invention of a mere romancing fisherman of Galilee.

To expect these four men, of their own unaided effort, to invent the Gospels is like expecting a child to produce a mighty battleship from the building set it received for Christmas. If not even the united genius of the world's greatest philosophers combined could have produced the Gospels, how can we reasonably believe that they were a romance invented by the four writers?

Moreover, if further evidence is still required, what motive could these men have had for deceiving, not only their own but all future generations, with lies? Men lie when they perceive that by so doing they will gain. If the Evangelists had any reason to believe that they would gain wealth or fame by their deceit, then there would be grounds for such a suggestion. But the direct opposite is the case. They knew perfectly well that in writing the Gospels, all they could expect from the world was persecution, imprisonment and death. From a modern standpoint they had nothing to gain but everything to lose. No! men do not lie when the only thing they can gain by so doing is misery and death. In point of fact, the holy lives and the sufferings in witness of the truths which they had recorded, gives the lie to the supposition that these writers wrote with the object of deceiving mankind.

Even if they had wanted, it would have been impossible for the writers of the Gospels to have been untruthful.

Remember, they were not writing a history of things which had happened centuries ago, or had taken place in a distant land. The events which they described and the people they mentioned were known, either to the readers personally or those readers had known others who had been eye-witnesses of these things. If their writings had been false, there would have been a general outcry, and people would not have accepted, still less died, for them.

Often it has been argued, by critics of the Gospels, that there are passages which do not agree but contradict one another. True, there are points which can be reconciled only after careful study. Yet isn't this, instead of being an argument against, a further proof that the New Testament is genuine? Had the Evangelists been impostors they would have taken great care that, in their writings, there was nothing which even appeared to be contradictory.

From what we have seen we are forced to the conclusion that the Gospels are true history and an eye-witness account of things which actually happened. An account of events either actually seen by the writers, or at least told to them by people who had been eye-witnesses. It is impossible for them to be otherwise.

Just for a moment, let us consider the effect of the Gospels on one who lived at the time they were written. His name was Saul, and he was the fiercest foe that the early Christians had to face. His whole energies were devoted to one end, exterminating the people responsible for the spread of the Gospels. His zeal for persecution was truly diabolical. He is on his way to Damascus, inflamed with hatred. On the road, a bright light strikes him from his horse and temporarily blinds him, and in an instant he is changed. Instead of the most violent persecutor, he becomes the most zealous teacher and missionary of the very Gospels he had vowed to exterminate. He glories in the privations and sufferings he undergoes in its services, and boasts that he is as an Apostle born out of due time.

If the Gospels are a mere romance, how is it possible to account for the history of St. Paul? Safely, we can claim that the only explanation, not only of this great Apostle, but of all subsequent Catholic history, is living confirmation that the New Testament is what we set out to prove, namely, a true historical record. In this light, we shall, in some booklets to follow, examine the Main Character of these Gospels; examine Christ's claims not only to have brought man the necessary Revelation which men needed, but also the claim that He is its Author. Having satisfied ourselves with regard to His claims and with regard to the authorship of the Gospels, we shall pass on to find out what means He took to ensure that His teaching should be available for all mankind; since, as we saw, it must be clear, well-defined and easily accessible to all types and classes of men. This Revelation, since man's eternal happiness or misery depends on it, is of vital importance. It is essential that we, as Catholics, should be able to give the reason to anyone that asks us, of the hope that is in us.

Nihil Obstat:
Recarredus Fleming,
Censor Theol. Deput.,

* Eduardus,
Archiep. Dublinen.,
Censor Theol. Deput.,
28/6/1939
