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*WHAT IS VITAL IN CHRISTIANITY?*<sup>1</sup>

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I do not venture to meet this company as one qualified to preach, nor yet as an authority in matters which are technically theological. My contribution is intended to present some thoughts that have interested me as a student of philosophy. I hope that one or another of these thoughts may aid others in formulating their own opinions, and in defining their own religious interests, whether these interests and opinions are or are not in agreement with mine.

My treatment of the question, *What is vital in Christianity?* will involve a study of three different special questions, which I propose to discuss in order, as follows:

1. What sort of faith or of practice is it that can be called vital to any religion? That is, By what criteria, in the case of any religion, can that which is vital be distinguished from that which is not vital?

2. In the light of the criteria established by answering this first question, what are to be distinguished as the vital elements of Christianity?

3. What permanent value, and in particular what value for us today, have those ideas and practices and religious attitudes which we should hold to be vital for Christianity?

## I

The term *vital*, as here used, obviously involves a certain metaphor. That is vital for a living organism without which that organism cannot live. So breathing is a vital affair for us all. That is vital for an organic type which is so characteristic of that

<sup>1</sup>Three addresses given at the Phillips Brooks House, Harvard University, March 18 and 25 and April 1 1909.

type that, were such vital features changed, the type in question, if not altogether destroyed, would be changed into what is essentially another type. Thus the contrast between gill-breathing and lung-breathing appears to be vital for the organic types in question. When we treat the social and mental life which is characteristic of a religion as if it were the life of an organism, or of a type or group of organisms, we use the word vital in accordance with the analogies thus indicated.

If, with such a meaning of the word vital, we turn to the religions that exist among men, we find that any religion presents itself to an observer as a more or less connected group, (1) of religious practices, such as prayers, ceremonies, festivals, rituals, and other observances, and (2) of religious ideas, the ideas taking the form of traditions, legends, and beliefs about the gods or about spirits. On the higher levels, the religious ideas are embodied in sacred books, and some of them are emphasized in formal professions of faith. They also come, upon these higher levels, into a certain union with other factors of spiritual life which we are hereafter to discuss.

Our first question is, naturally, What is the more vital about a religion, its religious practices, or its religious ideas, beliefs, and spiritual attitudes?

As soon as we attempt to answer this question, our procedure is somewhat different, according as we dwell upon the simpler and more primitive, or on the other hand upon the higher and more reflective and differentiated forms or aspects of religion.

In primitive religions, and in the religious lives of many of the more simple-minded and less reflective people of almost any faith, however civilized, the religious practices seem in general to be more important, and more vital for the whole structure of the religious life, than are the conscious beliefs which accompany the practices. I say this is true of primitive religions in general. It is also true for many of the simple-minded followers even of very lofty religions. This rule is well known to the students of the history of religion in our day, and can easily be illustrated from some of the most familiar aspects of religious life. But it is a rule which, as I frankly confess, has frequently been ignored or misunderstood by philosophers, as well as by others who have been

led to approach religions for the sake of studying the opinions of those who hold them. In various religious ideas people may be very far apart, at the same moment when their religious practices are in close harmony. In the world at large, including both the civilized and the uncivilized, we may say that the followers of a cult are, in general, people who accept as binding the practices of that cult. But the followers of the same cult may accompany the acceptance of the cult with decidedly different interpretations of the reason why these practices are required of them, and of the supernatural world which is supposed to be interested in the practices.

In primitive religions this rule is exemplified by facts which many anthropologists have expressed by saying that, on the whole, in the order of evolution, religious practices normally precede at least the more definite religious beliefs. Men come to believe as they do regarding the nature of some supernatural being largely in consequence of the fact that they have first come to follow some course of conduct not for any conscious reason at all but merely from some instinctive tendency which by accident has determined this or that special expression. When the men come to observe this custom of theirs, and to consider why they act thus, some special religious belief often arises as a sort of secondary explanation of their practice. And this belief may vary without essentially altering either the practice or the religion. The pigeons in our college-yard cluster about the benevolent student or visitor who feeds them. This clustering is the result of instinct and of their training in seeking food. The pigeons presumably have no conscious ideas or theories about the true nature of the man who feeds them. Of course, they are somehow aware of his presence, and of what he does, but they surely have only the most rudimentary and indefinite germs of ideas about what he is. But if the pigeons were to come to consciousness somewhat after the fashion of primitive men, very probably they would regard this way of getting food as a sort of religious function and would begin to worship the visitor as a kind of god. If they did so, what idea about this god would be to them vital? Would their beliefs show that they first reasoned abstractly from effect to cause, and said, "He must be a being both powerful and benevolent, for otherwise

his feeding of us in this way could not be explained"? Of course, if the pigeons developed into theologians or philosophers, they might reason thus. But if they came to self-consciousness as primitive men generally do, they would more probably say at first: "Behold, do we not cluster about him and beg from him and coo to him; and do we not get our food by doing thus? He is, then, a being whom it is essentially worth while to treat in this way. He responds to our cooing and our clustering. Thus we compel him to feed us. Therefore he is a worshipful being. And this is what we mean by a god, namely, some one whom it is practically useful to conciliate and compel by such forms of worship as we practice."

If one passes from this feigned instance to the facts of early religious life, one easily observes illustrations of a similar process, both in children and in the more primitive religions of men. A child may be taught to say his prayers. His early ideas of God as a giver of good things, or as a being to be propitiated, are then likely to be secondary to such behavior. The prayers he often says long before he sees why. His elders, at least when they follow the older traditions of religious instruction, begin by requiring of him the practice of saying prayers; and then they gradually initiate the child into the ruling ideas of what the practice means. But for such a stage of religious consciousness the prayer is more vital than the interpretation. In primitive religions taboo and ritual alike precede, at least in many cases, those explanations of the taboos and of the ritual practices which inquirers get in answer to questions about the present beliefs of the people concerned. As religion grows, practices easily pass over from one religion to another, and through every such transition seem to preserve, or even to increase, their sacredness; but they get in the end, in each new religion into which they enter, a new explanation in terms of opinions, themselves producing, so to speak, the new ideas required to fit them to each change of setting. In this process the practices taken over may come to seem vital to the people concerned, as the Mass does to Catholics. But the custom may have preceded the idea. The Christmas and Easter festivals are well-known and classic examples of this process. Christianity did not initiate them. It assimilated them. But it

then explained why it did so by saying that it was celebrating the birth and resurrection of Christ.

It is no part of my task to develop at length a general theory about this frequent primacy of religious practice over the definite formulation of religious belief. The illustrations of the process are, however, numerous. Even on the higher levels of religious development, where the inner life comes to be emphasized, the matter indeed becomes highly complicated, but still, wherever there is an established church, the term "dissenter" often means in popular use a person who will not attend this church, or who will not conform to its practices, much more consciously and decidedly than it means a person whose private ideas about religious topics differ from those of the people with whom he is willing to worship, or whose rules he is willing to obey.

Nevertheless, upon these higher levels a part of the religious requirement very generally comes to be a demand for some sort of orthodoxy. And therefore, upon this level, conformity of practice is indeed no longer enough. However the simple-minded emphasize practice, the religious body itself requires not only the right practice, but also the acceptance of a profession of faith. And on this higher level, and in the opinion of those concerned with the higher aspect of their religion, this acceptance must now be not only a formal act but a sincere one. Here, then, in the life of the higher religions, belief tends to come into a position of primacy which results in a very notable contrast between the higher and the simpler forms and aspects of religious life. When religions take these higher forms, belief is at least officially emphasized as quite equivalent in importance to practice. For those who view matters thus, "He that believeth not shall be damned," an unbeliever is, as such, a foe of the religion in question, and of its gods and of its worshippers. As an infidel he is a miscreant, an enemy not only of the true faith but perhaps of mankind. In consequence, religious persecution and religious wars may come to seem, at least for a time, inevitable means of defending the faith. And those who outgrow, or who never pass through, this stage of warlike propaganda and of persecution may still insist that for them it is faith rather than practice which is the vital element of their religion. To what heights such a view of

the religious life may attain, the Pauline epistles bear witness "Through grace are ye saved." And grace comes by faith, or in the form of faith.

## II

So far, then, we have two great phases or stages of religious life. On the one stage it is religious practice, as such, that is for the people concerned the more vital thing. Their belief is relatively secondary to their practice, and may considerably vary while the practice remains the unvarying, and, for them, vital feature. On the other and no doubt higher, because more self-conscious, stage it is faith that assumes the conscious primacy. And on this second stage, if you believe not rightly, you have no part in the religion in question. That these two stages or phases of the life of religion are in practice closely intermingled, everybody knows. The primitive and the lofty are, in the religious life of civilized men, very near together. The resulting entanglements furnish endlessly numerous problems for the religious life. For in all the higher faiths those who emphasize the inner life make much of faith as a personal disposition. And this emphasis, contending as it does with the more primitive and simple-minded tendency to lay stress upon the primacy of religious practice, has often led to revolt against existing formalism, against ritual requirements, and so to reforms, to heresies, to sects, or to new world-religions. Christianity itself, viewed as a world-religion, was the outgrowth of an emphasis upon a certain faith, to which its new practices were to be, and were, secondary. On the other hand, the appeal that every religion makes to the masses of mankind is most readily interpreted in terms of practice. Thus the baptism of a whole tribe or nation, at the command of their chief, has been sometimes accounted conversion. A formal profession of a creed in such cases has indeed become an essential part of the requirements of the religion in question. But this profession itself can be regarded, and often is regarded by whole masses of the people concerned, as a ceremony to be performed obediently, and no doubt willingly, rather than as an expression of any highly conscious inner conviction. In consequence, an individual worshipper may come to repeat the creed as a more or less magic charm, to ward

off the demons who are known not to like to hear it; or, again, the individual may rise and say the creed simply because the whole congregation at a certain point of the service has to do so.

In particular, since the creeds of the higher faiths relate to what are regarded as mysteries, while the creed must be repeated by all the faithful, the required belief in the creed is often not understood to imply any clear or wise or even intelligent ideas about what the creed really intends to teach. Even in emphasizing belief, then, one may thus interpret it mainly in terms of a willing obedience. The savage converted to the Roman Catholic Church is indeed taught not only to obey, but to profess belief, and as far as possible to get some sort of genuine inner belief. But he is regularly told that for his imperfect stage of insight it is enough if he is fully ready to say, "I believe what the church believes, both as far as I understand what the church believes and also as far as I do not understand what the church believes." And it is in this spirit that he must repeat the creed of the church. But his ideas about God and the world may meanwhile be as crude as his ignorance determines. He is still viewed as a Christian, if he is minded to accept the God of the church of the Christians, even though he still thinks of God as sometimes a visible and "magnified and non-natural" man, a corporeal presence sitting in the heavens, while the scholastic theologian who has converted him thinks of God as wholly incorporeal, as not situated *in loco* at all, as not even existent in time, but only in eternity, and as spiritual substance, whose nature, whose perfection, whose omniscience, and so on, are the topics of most elaborate definition.

Thus, even when faith in a creed becomes an essential part of the requirements of a religion, one often meets, upon a much higher level, that primacy of the practical over the theoretical side of religion which the child's prayers, and the transplanted festivals, and the conceivable religion of the pigeons illustrate. The faithful convert and his scholastic teacher agree much more in religious practices than in conscious religious ideas.

Meanwhile this very situation itself is regarded by all concerned as by no means satisfactory. And those followers of the higher faiths who take the inner life more seriously, are never

content with this acceptance of what seems to them merely external formalism. For them faith, whether it is accompanied with a clear understanding or not, means something essentially interior and deep and soul-transforming. Hence they continually insist that no one can satisfy God who does not rightly view God. And thus the conflict between the primacy of the practical and of the right faith constantly tends to assume new forms in the life of all the higher religions. The conflict concerns the question whether right practice or right belief is the more vital element in religion. Well-known formulae, constantly repeated in religious instruction, profess to solve the problem once for all. But it remains a problem whose solution, if any solution at all is reached, has to be worked out afresh in the religious experience of each individual.

### III

Some of you, to whom one of the best-known solutions of the problem is indeed familiar enough, will no doubt have listened to this statement of the conflict between the primacy of religious practice and the primacy of religious belief with a growing impatience. What right-minded and really pious person does not know, you will say, that there is only one way to overcome this opposition, and that is by remembering that true religion is never an affair either of mere practice, apart from inner sincerity, or of theoretically orthodox opinions, apart from other inner experiences and interests? Who does not know, you will say, that true religion is an affair of the whole man, not of deeds alone, nor of the intellect alone, but of the entire spiritual attitude,—of emotion and of trust,—of devotion and of motive,—of conduct guided by an inner light, and of conviction due to a personal contact with religious truth? Who does not know that about this all the best Christian teachers, whether Catholic or Protestant, are agreed? Who does not know that the Roman Catholic theologian who converts the savage regards his own personal salvation as due, in case he wins it, not to the theoretical accuracy of his theological formulations, but to the direct working of divine grace, which alone can prepare the soul for that vision of God which can never be attained by

mere reasonings, but can be won only through the miraculous gift of insight prepared for the blessed in heaven? Who has not learned that in the opinion of enlightened Christians the divine grace can for this very reason be as truly present in the humble and ignorant soul of the savage convert as in that of his learned and priestly confessor? Who, then, need confound true faith with the power to formulate the mysteries of the faith, except in so far, indeed, as one trustingly accepts whatever one can understand of the teachings of the church? It is indeed, you will insist, grace that saves, and through faith. But the saving faith, you will continue, is, at least in the present life, nothing theoretical. It is itself a gift of God. And it is essentially a spiritual attitude,—at once practical and such as to involve whatever grade of true knowledge is suited to the present stage of the soul in question. Herein, as some of you will say, the most enlightened and the most pious teachers of various religions, and certainly of very various forms of Christianity, are agreed. What is vital in the highest religion is neither the mere practice as external, nor the mere opinion as an internal formulation. It is the union of the two. It is the reaction of the whole spirit in the presence of an experience of the highest realities of human life and of the universe.

If any of you at this point assert this to be the solution of the problem as to what is vital in religion, if you insist that such spiritual gifts as the Pauline charity, and such emotional experiences as those of conversion, and of the ascent of the soul to God in prayer, and such moral sincerity as is the soul of all good works, are regarded by our best teachers as the really vital elements in religion,—you are insisting upon a solution of our problem which indeed belongs to a third, and no doubt to a very lofty phase of the religious consciousness. And it is just this third phase or level of the religious consciousness that I am to try to study in these conferences. But were such a statement in itself enough to show every one of us precisely what this vital feature of the higher religions is, and just how it can be secured by every man, and just how our modern world, with all its doubts and its problems, is related to the solution just proposed, I should indeed have no task in these lectures but to repeat the well-known

formula, to apply it briefly to the case of Christianity, and to leave the rest to your own personal experience.

#### IV

But as a fact, and as most of you know by personal experience, the well-known proposal of a solution thus stated is to most of us rather the formulation of a new problem than the end of the whole matter. If this higher unity of faith and practice, of grace and right-mindedness, of the right conduct and the clear insight, of the knowledge of what is real and the feeling for the deepest values of life,—if all this is indeed the goal of the highest religions, and if it constitutes what their best teachers regard as vital, how far are many of us at the present day from seeing our way towards adapting any such solution to our own cases! For us, the modern world is full of suggestions of doubt regarding the articles of the traditional creeds. The moral problems of our time, full of new perplexities, confuse us with regard to what ought to be done. Our spiritual life is too complex to be any longer easily unified, or to be unified merely in the ways useful for earlier generations. Our individualism is too highly conscious to be easily won over to a mood of absorption in any one universal ideal. Our sciences are too complicated to make it easy for us to conceive the world either as a unity, or as spiritual. The church is, for most of us, no longer one visible institution with a single authoritative constitution, but a variety of social organizations, each with its own traditions and values. The spirit of Christianity, which even at the outset Paul found so hard to formulate and to reduce to unity, can no longer be formulated by us precisely in his terms. Hence some of us seek for some still simpler, because more primitive, type of Christianity. But when we look behind Paul for the genuinely primitive Christianity, we meet with further problems, one or two of which we are soon to formulate more precisely in this discussion. In brief, however vital for a religion may be its power to unify the whole man, outer and inner, practical and intellectual, ignorant and wise, emotional and critical, the situation of our time is such that this unification is no longer so presented to us by any one body of religious teach-

ing, that we can simply accept it from tradition (since in the modern world we must both act and think as individuals for ourselves), nor that we can easily learn it from our own experience, since in these days our experience is no longer as full of the religiously inspiring elements as was the experience of the times of Jonathan Edwards, or of the Reformation, or of the founders of the great mediaeval religious orders, or of the early Christian church. If this unity of the spiritual life is to be reconquered, we must indeed take account of the old solutions, but we must give to them new forms, and adopt new ways, suited to the ideas and to the whole spirit of the modern world. Hence the proposed solution that I just rehearsed is simply the statement of the common programme of all the highest religions of humanity. But how to interpret this programme in terms which will make it of live and permanent meaning for the modern world,—this is precisely the religious problem of today.

To sum up, then, our answer to the first of my three problems, namely, What form of faith or of practice can be called vital to any religion? I reply: In the case of any one of the more primitive religions it is, in general, the religious practices that are the most vital features of that religion, and these practices, in general, are vital in proportion as they are necessary to the social life of the tribe or nation amongst which they flourish, so that, when these vital practices die out, the nation in question either dwindles, or is conquered, or passes over into some new form of social order. Secondly, in the higher religions, because of the emphasis that they lay upon the inner life, and especially in the world-religions such as Buddhism, Mohammedanism, and Christianity, belief tends to become a more and more vital feature of the religions in question, and the beliefs—such as monotheism, or the acceptance of a prophet, or of a longer or shorter formulated creed—are vital to such a religion in ways and to degrees which the preachers and the missionaries, the religious wars and the sectarian conflicts of these faiths illustrate,—vital in proportion as the men concerned are ready to labor or to die for these beliefs, or to impose them upon other men, or to insist that no one shall be admitted to the religious community who does not accept them.

But thirdly, as soon as religious beliefs are thus emphasized as

over against religious practices, the religious practices are not, thereby, in general set aside or even discouraged. On the contrary, they generally grow more numerous, and often more imposing. And consequently, in the minds of the more ignorant, or of the less earnest, of the faithful there appears throughout the life of these higher religions a constant tendency to revert to the more primitive type of religion, or else never, in fact, to rise above that type. Hence, even in the religions wherein conformity is understood to imply a sincere orthodoxy, the primacy of ritual or of other practice over against faith and the inner life constantly tends to hold its own. There arises in such religions the well-known conflict of inner and outer, of faith and merely external works. This conflict remains a constant source of transformations, of heresies, and of reforms, in all these higher religions, and is in fact an irrepressible conflict so long as human nature is what it is. For a great mass of the so-called faithful, it is the conformity of practice that thus remains vital. But the teachers of the religion assert that the faith is vital.

And now, fourthly, the higher religions, especially as represented in their highest type of teachings, are deeply concerned in overcoming and in reducing to unity this conflict of formal observance with genuine faith, wherever the conflict arises. The proposed solution which is most familiar, most promising, if it can be won, and most difficult to be won, is the solution which consists in asserting and of showing, if possible, in life, that what is most vital to religion is not practice apart from faith, nor faith apart from practice, but a complete spiritual reaction of the entire man,—a reaction which, if possible, shall unite a right belief in the unseen world of the faith with the inner perfection and blessedness that ought to result from the indwelling of the truth in the soul, and with that power to do good works and to conform to the external religious requirements which is to be expected from one whose soul is at peace and lives in the light. In a word, what this solution supposes to be most vital to the highest religion is the union of faith and works through a completed spirituality.

Meanwhile, as we have also seen, just our age is especially beset with the problem: How can such a solution be any longer an object of reasonable hope, when the faiths have become uncertain,

the practices largely antiquated, our life and our duty so problematic, and our environment so uninspiring to our religious interests? So much, then, for the first of our three problems.

## V

It is now our task to consider the second of our questions. How does this problem regarding what is vital to a religion appear when we turn to the special case of Christianity?

Our review of the sorts of elements which are found vital upon the various levels of the religious consciousness will have prepared you to look at once for what is most vital about Christianity upon the third and highest of the three levels that I have enumerated. It is true that in the minds of great masses of the less enlightened and less devoted population of the Christian world certain religious practices have always been regarded as constituting the most vital features of their religion. These practices are especially those which for the people in question imply the obedient acceptance of the sacraments of the church. Of course for such, faith is indeed a condition for the efficacy of the sacraments. But faith expresses itself especially through and in one's relation to these sacraments. Such emphasis upon religious practices is inevitable, so long as human nature is what it is. But Christianity is obviously, upon all of its higher levels, essentially a religion of the inner life; and for all those in any body of Christians who are either more devout or more enlightened the problem of the church has always included, along with other things, the problem of finding and formulating the true faith; and such faith is, to such people, vital to their religion. In consequence of its vast successes in conquering, after a fashion, its own regions of the world, Christianity has had to undertake upon a very large scale, and over a long series of centuries, the task of adapting itself to the needs of peoples who were in very various, and often in very primitive, conditions of culture. Hence, in formulating its faith and practice, it has had full experience of the conflict between those who in a relatively childlike and primitive way regard religious practice as the primal evidence and expression of the possession of the true religion, and those who, on the contrary, insist primarily upon right

belief and a rightly guided inner life as a necessary condition for such conduct as can be pleasing to God. Where, as in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, the effort to reconcile these two motives has the longest traditional expression, that is, where the most elaborate official definition of the saving faith has been deliberately joined with the most precise requirements regarding religious practice, the conflict of motives here in question has been only the more notable as a factor in the history of the church,—however completely for an individual believer this very conflict may appear to have been solved. In the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments, in the theory of the conditions upon which their validity depends, and of their effects upon the process of salvation, the most primitive of religious tendencies stand side by side with the loftiest spiritual interests in glaring contrast. On the one hand the doctrine of the sacraments appeals to primitive tendencies, because certain purely magical influences and incantations are in question. The repetition of certain formulae and deeds acts as an irresistible miraculous charm. On the other hand the life of the spirit is furthered through the administration of these same sacraments by some of the deepest and most spiritual of influences, and by some of the most elevated forms of inner life which the consciousness of man has ever conceived. That there is an actual conflict of motives involved in this union of primitive magic with spiritual cultivation, the church in question has repeatedly found, when the greater schisms relating to the validity or to the interpretation of her sacraments have rent the unity of her body, and when, sometimes within her own fold, the mystics have quarrelled with the formalists, and both with the modernists, of any period in which the religious life of the church was at all intense.

Most of you will agree, I suppose, as to the sort of solution of such conflicts between the higher and lower aspects of Christianity which is to be sought, in case there is to be any hope of a solution. You will probably be disposed to say: What is vital in Christianity, if Christianity is permanently to retain its vitality at all in our modern world, must be defined primarily neither in terms of mere religious practice nor yet in terms of merely intellectual formulation, but in terms of that unity of will and intellect that may be expressed in the spiritual disposition of the whole man. You will

say, What is vital in Christianity must be, if anything, the Christian interpretation of human life, and the life lived in the light of this interpretation. Such a life, you will insist, can never be identified by its formal religious practices, however important, or even indispensable, some of you may believe this or that religious practice to be. Nor can one reduce what is vital in Christianity merely to a formulated set of opinions, since, as the well-known word has it, the devils also believe, and tremble, and, as some of you may be disposed benevolently to add, the philosophers also believe, and lecture. No, you will say, the Christian life includes practices, which may need to be visible and formal; it includes beliefs, which may have to be discussed and formulated; but Christianity is, first of all, an interpretation of life,—an interpretation that is nothing if not practical, and also nothing if not guided from within by a deep spiritual interest and a genuine religious experience.

So far we shall find it easy to agree regarding the principles of our inquiry. Yet, as the foregoing review of the historical conflicts of religion has shown us, we thus merely formulate our problem. We stand at the outset of what we want to do.

What is that interpretation of life which is vital to Christianity? How must a Christian undertake to solve his problem of his own personal salvation? How shall he view the problem of the salvation of mankind? What is that spiritual attitude which is essential to the Christian religion? Thus our second problem now formulates itself.

## VI

Amongst the countless efforts to answer these questions there are two which in these discussions we especially need to face. The two answers thus proposed differ decidedly from each other. Each is capable of leading to various further and more special formulations of opinion about the contents of the Christian religion.

The first answer may be stated as follows: What is vital about Christianity is simply the spiritual attitude and the doctrine of Christ, as he himself taught this doctrine and this attitude in the body of his authentic sayings and parables, and as he lived all this out in his own life. All in Christianity that

goes beyond this,—all that came to the consciousness of the church after Christ's own teaching had been uttered and finished, either is simply a paraphrase, an explanation, or an application of the original doctrine of Christ, or else is not vital,—is more or less unessential, mythical, or at the very least external. Grasp the spirit of Christ's own teaching, interpret life as he interpreted it, and live out this interpretation of life as completely as you can, imitating him—and then you are in essence a Christian. Fail to comprehend the spirit of Christ, or to live out his interpretation of life, and you in so far fail to possess what is vital about Christianity. This, I say, is the first of the two answers that we must consider. It is an answer well known to most of you, and an emphasis upon this answer characterizes some of the most important religious movements of our own time.

The second answer is as follows: What is vital about Christianity depends upon regarding the mission and the life of Christ as an organic part of a divine plan for the redemption and salvation of man. While the doctrine of Christ, as his sayings record this doctrine, is indeed an essential part of this mission, one cannot rightly understand, above all one cannot apply, the teachings of Christ, one cannot live out the Christian interpretation of life, unless one first learns to view the person of Christ in its true relation to God, and the work of Christ as an entirely unique revelation and expression of God's will. The work of Christ, however, culminated in his death. Hence, as the historic church has always maintained, it is the cross of Christ that is the symbol of whatever is most vital about Christianity. As for the person of Christ as his life revealed it,—what is vital in Christianity depends upon conceiving this personality in essentially superhuman terms. The prologue to the Fourth Gospel deliberately undertakes to state what for the author of that Gospel is vital in Christianity. This prologue does so by means of the familiar doctrine of the eternal Word that was the beginning, that was with God and was God, and that in Christ was made flesh and dwelt amongst men. Abandon this doctrine and you give up what is vital in Christianity. Moreover, the work of Christ was essential to the whole relation of his own teachings to the life of men. Human nature being what it is, the teaching that

Christ's sayings record cannot enter into the genuine life of any one who has not first been transformed into a new man by means of an essentially superhuman and divine power of grace. It was the work of Christ to open the way whereby this divine grace became and still becomes efficacious. The needed transformation of human nature, the change of life which according to Christ's sayings is necessary as a condition for entering the kingdom of heaven, this is made possible through the effects of the life and death of Christ. This life and death were events whereby man's redemption was made possible, whereby the atonement for sin was accomplished. In brief, what is vital to Christianity includes an acceptance of the two cardinal doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement. For only in case these doctrines are accepted is it possible to interpret life in the essentially Christian way, and to live out this interpretation.

Here are two distinct and, on the whole, opposed answers to the question, What is vital in Christianity? I hope that you will see that each of these answers is an effort to rise above the levels wherein either religious practice or intellectual belief is over-emphasized. It is useless for the partisan of the Christianity of the prologue to the Fourth Gospel to accuse his modern opponent of a willingness to degrade Christ to the level of a mere teacher of morals, and Christianity to a mere practice of good works. It is equally useless for one who insists upon the sufficiency of the gospel of Christ simply as Christ's recorded sayings teach it, to accuse his opponent of an intention to make true religion wholly dependent upon the acceptance of certain metaphysical opinions regarding the superhuman nature of Christ. No, the opposition between these two views regarding what is vital in Christianity is an opposition that appears on the highest levels of the religious consciousness. It is not that one view says, "Christ taught these and these moral doctrines, and the practice of these teachings constitutes all that is vital in Christianity." It is not that the opposing view says: "Christ was the eternal Word made flesh, and a mere belief in this fact and in the doctrine of the atoning death is the vital feature of Christianity." No, both of these two views attempt to be views upon the third level of the religious consciousness,—views about the whole inter-

pretation of the higher life, and of its relation to God and to the salvation of man. So far, neither view, as its leading defenders now hold it, can accuse the other of lapsing into those more primitive views of religion which I have summarized in the earlier part of this paper. And I have dwelt so long upon a preliminary view of the relations between faith and practice in the history of religion, because I wanted to clear the way for a study of our problem on its genuinely highest level, so that we shall henceforth be clear of certain old and uninspiring devices of controversy. Both parties are really trying to express what is vital in the Christian conception of life. Both view Christianity as a faith which gives sense to life, and also as a mode of life which is centred about a faith. The true dispute arises upon the highest levels. The question is simply this: Is the gospel which Christ preached, that is, the teaching recorded in the authentic sayings and parables, intelligible, acceptable, vital, in case you take it by itself? Or, does Christianity lose its vitality in case you cannot give a true sense to those doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement which the traditional Christian world has so long held and so deeply loved? And furthermore, can you, in the light of modern insight, give any longer a reasonable sense to the traditional doctrines of the atonement and the incarnation? In other words: Is Christianity essentially a religion of redemption, in the sense in which tradition defined redemption? Or is Christianity simply that religion of the love of God and the love of man which the sayings and the parables so richly illustrate?

However much, upon its lower levels, Christianity may have used and included the motives of primitive religion, this our present question is not reducible to the terms of the relatively lower conflict between a religion of creed and a religion of practice. The issue now defined concerns the highest interests of religious life.

In favor of the traditional view that the essence of Christianity consists, first, in the doctrine of the superhuman person and the redemptive work of Christ, and, secondly, in the interpretative life that rests upon this doctrine, stands the whole authority, such as it is, of the needs and religious experience of the church of Christian history. The church early found, or at least felt, that

it could not live at all without thus interpreting the person and work of Christ.

Against such an account of what is vital in Christianity stands today for many of us the fact that the doctrine in question seems to be, at least in the main, unknown to the historic Christ, in so far as we can learn what he taught, while both the evidence for the traditional doctrine and the interpretation of it have rested during Christian history upon reports which our whole modern view of the universe disposes many of us to regard as legendary, and upon a theology which many of us can no longer accept as literally true. Whether such objections are finally valid, we must later consider. I mention the objections here because they are familiar, and because in our day they lead many to turn from the tangles of tradition with a thankful joy and relief to the hopeful task of trying to study, to apply, and to live the pure Gospel of Christ as he taught it in that body of sayings which, as many insist, need no legends to make them intelligible, and no metaphysics to make them sacred.

Yet, as a student of philosophy, coming in no partisan spirit, I must insist that this reduction of what is vital in Christianity to the so-called pure Gospel of Christ, as he preached it and as it is recorded in the body of the presumably authentic sayings and parables, is profoundly unsatisfactory. The main argument for doubting that this so-called pure Gospel of Christ contains the whole of what is vital in Christianity rests upon the same considerations that led the historical church to try in its own way to interpret, and hence to supplement, this gospel by reports that may have been indeed full of the legendary, by metaphysical ideas that may indeed have been deeply imperfect, but by a deep instinctive sense of genuine religious values which, after all, was indispensable for later humanity,—a sense of religious values which was a true sense. For one thing, Christ can hardly be supposed to have regarded his most authentically reported religious sayings as containing the whole of his message, or as embodying the whole of his mission. For, if he had so viewed the matter, the Messianic tragedy in which his life-work culminated would have been needless and unintelligible. For the rest, the doctrine that he taught is, as it stands, essentially incomplete. It is not a

rounded whole. It looks beyond itself for a completion, which the master himself unquestionably conceived in terms of the approaching end of the world, and which the church later conceived in terms of what has become indeed vital for Christianity.

As modern men, then, we stand between opposed views. Each view has to meet hostile arguments. Each can make a case in favor of its value as a statement of the essence of Christianity. On the one hand the Christ of the historically authentic sayings,—whose gospel is, after all, not to be understood except as part of a much vaster religious process; on the other hand the Christ of legend, whom it is impossible for us modern men longer to conceive as the former ages of the church often conceived him. Can we choose between the two? Which stands for what is vital in Christianity? And, if we succeed in defining this vital element, what can it mean to us today, and in the light of our modern world?

Thus we have defined our problems. Our next task is to face them as openly, as truthfully, and as carefully as our opportunity permits.

## VII

Let us, then, briefly consider the first of the two views which have been set over against one another.

The teachings of Christ which are preserved to us do indeed form a body of doctrine that one can survey and study without forming any final opinion about the historical character of the narratives with which these teachings are accompanied in the three Synoptic Gospels. The early church preserved the sayings, recorded them, no doubt, in various forms, but learned to regard one or two of the bodies of recorded sayings as especially important and authentic. The documents in which these earliest records were contained are lost to us; but our gospels, especially those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, preserve the earlier tradition in a way that can be tested by the agreements in the reported sayings as they appear in the different gospels. It is of course true that some of the authentic teachings of Christ concern matters in regard to which other teachers of his own people had already reached insights that tended towards his own. But nobody can doubt that the sayings, taken as a whole, embody a new and

profoundly individual teaching, and are what they pretend to be; namely, at least a partial presentation of an interpretation of life,—an interpretation that was deliberately intended by the teacher to revolutionize the hearts and lives of those to whom the sayings were addressed. Since a recorded doctrine simply taken in itself, and apart from any narrative, is an unquestionable fact, and since a new and individual doctrine is a fact that can be explained only as the work of a person, it is plain that, whatever you think of the narrative portions of the gospels, your estimate of Christ's reported teachings may be freed at once from any of the perplexities that perhaps beset you as to how much you can find out about his life. So much at least he was; namely, the teacher of this doctrine. As to his life, it is indeed important to know that he taught the doctrine as one who fully meant it, that while he taught it he so lived it out as to win the entire confidence of those who were nearest to him, that he was ready to die for it, and for whatever else he believed to be the cause that he served, and that when the time came he did die for his cause. So much of the gospel narrative is with all reasonable certainty to be regarded as historical.

So far, then, one has to regard the teaching of Christ as a perfectly definite object for historical study and personal imitation, and as, in its main outlines, an accessible tradition. It is impossible to be sure of our tradition as regards each individual saying. But the main body of the doctrine stands before us as a connected whole, and it is in its wholeness that we are interested in comprehending its meaning.

Now there is also no doubt, I have said, that this doctrine is intended as at least a part of an interpretation of life. For the explicit purpose of the teacher is to transform the inner life of his hearers, and thus to bring about, through this transformation, a reform of their individual outer life. It is, furthermore, sure that, while the teaching in question includes a moral ideal, it is no merely moral teaching, but is full of a profoundly religious interest. For the transformation of the inner life which is in question has to do with the whole relation of the individual man to God. And there are especially two main theses of the teacher which do indeed explicitly relate to the realm of the superhuman

and divine world, and which therefore do concern what we may call religious metaphysics. That is, these theses are assertions about a reality that does not belong to the physical realm, and that is not confined to the realities which we contemplate when we consider merely ethical truth as such. The first of these religious theses relates to the nature of God. It is usually summarized as the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God. In its fuller statement it involves that account of the divine love for the individual man which is so characteristic and repeated a feature of the authentic sayings. The other thesis is what we now call a judgment of value. It is the assertion of the infinite worth of each individual person,—an assertion richly illustrated in the parables, and used as the basis of the ethical teaching of Christ, since the value that God sets upon your brother is the deepest reason assigned to show why your own life should be one of love towards your brother.

### VIII

So much for the barest suggestion of a teaching which you all know, and which I have not here further to expound. Our present question is simply this: Is this the whole of what is vital to Christianity? Or is there something vital which is not contained in these recorded sayings, so far as they relate to the matters just summarily mentioned?

The answer to this question is suggested by certain very well-known facts. First, these sayings are, in the master's mind, only part of a programme which, as the event showed, related not only to the individual soul and its salvation, but to the reform of the whole existing and visible social order. Or, expressed in our modern terms, the teacher contemplated a social revolution, as well as the before-mentioned universal religious reformation of each individual life. He was led, at least towards the end of his career, to interpret his mission as that of the Messiah of his people. That the coming social revolution was conceived by him in divine and miraculous terms, that it was to be completed by the final judgment of all men, that the coming kingdom was to be not of this world, in the sense in which the Roman Empire was of this world, but was to rest upon the directly visible triumph of God's will through the miraculous appearance of the chosen

messenger who should execute this will,—all this regarding the conception which was in Christ's mind seems clear. But, however the coming revolution was conceived, it was to be a violent and supernatural revolution of the external social order, and it was to appear openly to all men upon earth. The meek, the poor, were to inherit the earth; the mighty were to be cast down; the kingdoms of this world were to pass away; and the divine sovereignty was to take its visible place as the controller of all things.

Now it is no part of my present task to endeavor to state any theory as to why the master viewed his kingdom of heaven, in part at least, in this way. You may interpret the doctrine as the church has for ages done, as a doctrine relating to the far-off future end of all human affairs and to the supernatural mission of Christ as both Saviour and Judge of the world; or you may view the revolutionary purposes of the master as I myself actually do, simply as his personal interpretation of the Messianic traditions of his people and of the social needs of his time and of the then common but mistaken expectation of the near end of the world. In any case, if this doctrine, however brought about or interpreted, was for the master a vital part of his teaching, then you have to view the resulting interpretation of life accordingly. I need not say, however, that whoever today can still find a place for the Messianic hopes and for the doctrine of the last judgment in his own interpretation of Christianity, has once for all made up his mind to regard a doctrine,—and a deeply problematic doctrine,—a profoundly metaphysical doctrine about the person and work of Christ, and about the divine plan for the salvation of man,—as a vital part of his own Christianity.

And now, in this same connection, we can point out that, if the whole doctrine of Christ had indeed consisted for him in regarding the coming of the kingdom of heaven as identical with the inner transformation of each man by the spirit of divine love, then that direct and open opposition to the existing social authorities of his people which led to the Messianic tragedy, would have been for the master simply needless. Christ chose this plan of open and social opposition for reasons of his own. We may interpret these reasons as the historical church has done, or we may view the

matter otherwise, as I myself do. In any case, Christ's view of what was vital in Christianity certainly included, but also just as certainly went beyond, the mere preaching of the kingdom of heaven that is within you.

But one may still say, as many say who want to return to a purely primitive Christianity: Can *we* not choose to regard the religious doctrine of the parables and of the sayings, apart from the Messianic hopes and the anticipated social revolution, as for us vital and sufficient? Can we not decline to attempt to solve the Messianic mystery? Is it not for us enough to know simply that the master did indeed die for his faith, leaving his doctrine concerning the spiritual kingdom, concerning God the Father, and concerning man the beloved brother, as his final legacy to future generations? This legacy was of permanent value. Is it not enough for us?

I reply: To think thus is obviously to view Christ's doctrine as he himself did not view it. He certainly meant the kingdom of heaven to include the inner transformation of each soul by the divine love. But he also certainly conceived even this spiritual transformation in terms of some sort of Messianic mission, which was related to a miraculous coming transformation of human society. In the service of this Messianic social cause he died. And now even in Christ's interpretation of the inner and spiritual life of the individual man there are aspects which you cannot understand unless you view them in the light of the Messianic expectation. I refer to the master's doctrine upon that side of it which emphasizes the passive non-resistance of the individual man, in waiting for God's judgment. This side of Christ's doctrine has been frequently interpreted as requiring an extreme form of self-abnegation. It is this aspect of the doctrine which glorifies poverty as in itself an important aid to piety. In this sense too the master sometimes counsels a certain indifference to ordinary human social relations. In this same spirit his sayings so frequently illustrate the spirit of love by the mention of acts that involve the merely immediate relief of suffering, rather than by dwelling upon those more difficult and often more laborious forms of love which his own life indeed exemplified, and which take the form of the lifelong service of a super-personal social cause.

I would not for a moment wish to over-emphasize the meaning of these negative and ascetic aspects of the sayings. Christ's ethical doctrine was unquestionably as much a positive individualism as it was a doctrine of love. It was also as genuinely a stern doctrine as it was a humane one. Nobody understands it who reduces it to mere self-abnegation, or to non-resistance, or to any form of merely sentimental amiability. Nevertheless, as it was taught, it included sayings and illustrations which have often been interpreted in the sense of pure asceticism, in the sense of simple non-resistance, in the sense of an unworldliness that seems opposed to the establishment and the prizing of definite human ties,—yes, even in the sense of an anarchical contempt for the forms of any present worldly social order. In brief, the doctrine contains a deep and paradoxical opposition between its central assertion of the infinite value of love and of every individual human soul on the one hand, and those of its special teachings on the other hand, which seem to express a negative attitude towards all our natural efforts to assert and to sustain the values of life by means of definite social co-operation, such as we men can by ourselves devise. Now the solution of this paradox seems plain when we remember the abnormal social conditions of those whom Christ was teaching, and interpret his message in the light of his Messianic social mission with its coming miraculous change of all human relations. But in that case an important part of the sayings must be viewed as possessing a meaning which is simply relative to the place, to the people, to the time, and to those Messianic hopes of an early end of the existing social order,—hopes which we know to have been mistakenly cherished by the early church.

I conclude then, so far, that a simple return to a purely primitive Christianity as a body of doctrine complete in itself, directly and fully expressed in the sayings of Christ, and applicable, without notable supplement, to all times, and to our own day,—is an incomplete and therefore inadequate religious ideal. The spiritual kingdom of heaven, the transformation of the inner life which the sayings teach, is indeed a genuine part,—yes, a vital part,—of Christianity. But it is by no means the whole of what is vital to Christianity.

## IX

I turn to the second of the answers to our main question. According to this answer, Christianity is a redemptive religion. What is most vital to Christianity is contained in whatever is essential and permanent about the doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement. Now this is the answer which, as you will by this time see, I myself regard as capable of an interpretation that will turn it into a correct answer to our question. In answering thus, I do not for a moment call in question the just-mentioned fact that the original teaching of the master regarding the kingdom of heaven is indeed a vital part of the whole of Christianity. But I do assert that this so-called purely primitive Christianity is not so vital, is not so central, is not so essential to mature Christianity as are the doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement when these are rightly interpreted. In the light of these doctrines alone can the work of the master be seen in its most genuine significance.

Yet, as has been already pointed out, the literal acceptance of this answer to our question, as many still interpret the answer, seems to be beset by serious difficulties. These difficulties are now easily summarized. The historical Christ of the sayings and the parables, little as we certainly know regarding his life, is still a definite and, in the main, an accessible object of study and of interpretation, just because, whatever else he was, he was the teacher of this recorded interpretation of life,—whether or not you regard that recorded interpretation as a fully complete and rounded whole. But the Christ whom the traditional doctrines of the atonement and of the incarnation present to us appears in the minds of most of us as the Christ of the legends of the early church,—a being whose nature and whose reported supernatural mission seem to be involved in doubtful mysteries—mysteries both theological and historical. Now I am not here to tell you in detail why the modern mind has come to be unwilling to accept, as literal reports of historical facts, certain well-known legends. I am not here to discuss that unwillingness upon its merits. It is enough for my present purpose to say first that the unwillingness exists, and, secondly, that, as a fact, I myself believe

it to be a perfectly reasonable unwillingness. But I say this not at all because I suppose that modern insight has driven out of the reasonable world the reality of spiritual truth. The world of history is indeed a world full of the doubtful. And the whole world of phenomena in which you and I daily move about is a realm of mysteries. Nature and man, as we daily know them, and also daily misunderstand them, are not what they seem to us to be. The world of our usual human experience is but a beggarly fragment of the truth, and, if we take too seriously the bits of wisdom that it enables us to collect by the observation of special facts and of natural laws, it becomes a sort of curtain to hide from us the genuine realm of spiritual realities in the midst of which we all the while live. Moreover, it is one office of all higher religion to supplement these our fragments of experience and ordinary notions of the natural order, by a truer, if still imperfect, interpretation of the spiritual realities that are beyond our present vision. That is, it is the business of religion to lift, however little, the curtain, to inspire us, not by mere dreams of ideal life, but by enlightening glimpses of the genuine truth which, if we were perfect, we should indeed see, not, as now, through a glass darkly, but face to face.

All this I hold to be true. And yet I fully share the modern unwillingness to accept legends as literally true. For it is not by first repeating the tale of mere marvels, of miracles,—by dwelling upon legends, and then by taking the accounts in question as literally true historical reports,—it is not thus that we at present, in our modern life, can best help ourselves to find our way to the higher world. These miraculous reports are best understood when we indeed first dwell upon them lovingly and meditatively, but thereupon learn to view them as symbols, as the products of the deep and endlessly instructive religious imagination,—and thereby learn to interpret the actually definite, and to my mind unquestionably superhuman and eternal, truth that these legends express, but express by figures,—in the form of a parable, an image, a narrative, a tale of some special happening. The tale is not literally true. But its deeper meaning may be absolutely true. In brief, I accept the opinion that it is the office of religion to interpret truths which are in themselves perfectly definite,

eternal, and literal, but to interpret them to us by means of a symbolism which is the product of the constructive imagination of the great ages in which the religions which first voiced these truths grew up. There are some truths which our complicated natures best reach first through instinct and intuition, through parable and legend. Only when we have first reached them in this way, can most of us learn to introduce the practical and indeed saving application of these truths into our lives by living out the spirit of these parables. But then at last we may also hope, in the fulness of our own time, to comprehend these truths by a clearer insight into the nature of that eternal world which is indeed about and above us all, and which is the true source of our common life and light.

I am of course saying all this not as one having authority. I am simply indicating how students of philosophy who are of the type that I follow, are accustomed to view these things. In this spirit I will now ask you to look for a moment at the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Atonement in some of their deeper aspects. It is a gain thus to view the doctrines, whether or not you accept literally the well-known miraculous tale.

There has always existed in the Christian church a tradition tending to emphasize the conception that the supernatural work of Christ, which the church conceived in the form of the doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement, was not a work accomplished once for all at a certain historical point of time, but remains somehow an abiding work, or, perhaps, that it ought to be viewed as a timeless fact, which never merely happened, but which is such as to determine anew in every age the relation of the faithful to God. Of course, the church has often condemned as heretical one or another form of these opinions. Nevertheless, such opinions have in fact entered into the formation of the official dogmas. An instance is the influence that such an interpretation had upon the historic doctrine of the Mass and of the real presence,—a doctrine which, as I have suggested, combines in one some of the most primitive of religious motives with some of the deepest religious ideas that men have ever possessed. In other less official forms, in forms which frequently approached, or crossed, the boundaries of technical heresy, some of the mediaeval

mystics, fully believing in their own view of their faith, and innocent of any modern doubts about miracles, were accustomed in their tracts and sermons always and directly to interpret every part of the gospel narrative, including the miracles, as the expression of a vast and timeless whole of spiritual facts, whereof the narratives are merely symbols. In the sermons of Meister Eckhart, the great early German mystic, this way of preaching Christian doctrine is a regular part of his appeal to the people. I am myself in my philosophy no mystic, but I often wish that in our own days there were more who preached what is indeed vital in Christianity in somewhat the fashion of Eckhart. Let me venture upon one or two examples.

Eckhart begins as follows a sermon on the text, "Who is he that is born king of the Jews" (Matthew 22): "Mark you," he says, "mark you concerning this birth, where it takes place. I say, as I have often said: This eternal birth takes place in the soul, and takes place there precisely as it takes place in the eternal world,—no more, no less. This birth happens in the essence, in the very foundation, of the soul." "All other creatures," he continues, "are God's footstool. But the soul is his image. This image must be adorned and fulfilled through this birth of God in the soul." The birth, the incarnation, of God occurs then, so Eckhart continues, in every soul, and eternally. But, as he hereupon asks: Is not this then also true of sinners, if this incarnation of God is thus everlasting and universal? Wherein lies then the difference between saint and sinner? What special advantage has the Christian from this doctrine of the incarnation? Eckhart instantly answers: Sin is simply due to the blindness of the soul to the eternal presence of the incarnate God. And that is what is meant by the passage: "The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not."

Or again, Eckhart expounds in a sermon the statement that Christ came "in the fulness of time"; that is, as people usually and literally interpret the matter, Christ came when the human race was historically prepared for his coming. But Eckhart is careless concerning this historical and literal interpretation of the passage in question, although he doubtless also believes it. For him the true meaning of the passage is wholly spiritual. When,

he asks in substance, is the day fulfilled? At the end of the day. When is a task fulfilled? When the task is over. When, therefore, is the fulness of time reached? Whenever a man is in his soul ready to be done with time; that is, when in contemplation he dwells only upon and in the eternal. Then alone, when the soul forgets time, and dwells upon God who is above time, then, and then only, does Christ really come. For Christ's coming means simply our becoming aware of what Eckhart calls the eternal birth; that is, the eternal relation of the real soul to the real God.

It is hard, in our times, to get any sort of hearing for such really deeper interpretations of what is indeed vital in Christianity. A charming, but essentially trivial, religious psychology today invites some of us to view religious experience simply as a chance play-at-hide-and-peek with certain so-called subliminal mental forces and processes, whose crudely capricious crises and catastrophes shall have expressed themselves in that feverish agitation that some take to be the essence of all. Meanwhile there are those who today try to keep religion alive mainly as a more or less medicinal influence, a sort of disinfectant or anodyne, that may perhaps still prove its value to a doubting world by curing dyspepsia, or by removing nervous worries. Over against such modern tendencies,—humane, but still, as interpretations of the true essence of religion, essentially trivial,—there are those who see no hope except in holding fast by a literal acceptance of tradition. There are, finally, those who undertake the task, lofty indeed, but still, as I think, hopeless,—the task of restoring what they call a purely primitive Christianity. Now I am no disciple of Eckhart; but I am sure that whatever is vital in Christianity concerns in fact the relation of the real individual human person to the real God. To the minds of the people whose religious tradition we have inherited this relation first came through the symbolic interpretation that the early church gave to the life of the master. It is this symbolic interpretation which is the historical legacy of the church. It is the genuine and eternal truth that lies behind this symbol which constitutes what is indeed vital to Christianity. I personally regard the supernatural narratives in which the church embodied its faith simply as symbols,

—the product indeed of no man's effort to deceive, but of the religious imagination of the great constructive age of the early church. I also hold that the truth which lies behind these symbols is capable of a perfectly rational statement, that this statement lies in the direction which Eckhart, mistaken as he often was, has indicated to us. The truth in question is independent of the legends. It relates to eternal spiritual facts. I maintain also that those who, in various ages of the church, and in various ways, have tried to define and to insist upon what they have called the "Essential Christ," as distinguished from the historical Christ, have been nearing in various degrees the comprehension of what is vital in Christianity.

## X

What is true must be capable of expression apart from legends. What is eternally true may indeed come to our human knowledge through any event that happens to bring the truth in question to our notice; but, once learned, this truth may be seen to be independent of the historical events, whatever they were, which brought about our own insight. And the truth about the incarnation and the atonement seems to me to be statable in terms which I must next briefly indicate.

First, God, as our philosophy ought to conceive him, is indeed a spirit and a person; but he is not a being who exists in separation from the world, simply as its external creator. He expresses himself in the world; and the world is simply his own life, as he consciously lives it out. To use an inadequate figure, God expresses himself in the world as an artist expresses himself in the poems and the characters, in the music or in the other artistic creations, that arise within the artist's consciousness and that for him and in him consciously embody his will. Or again, God is this entire world, viewed, so to speak, from above and in its wholeness as an infinitely complex life which in an endless series of temporal processes embodies a single divine idea. You can indeed distinguish, and should distinguish, between the world as our common sense, properly but fragmentarily, has to view it, and as our sciences study it,—between this phenomenal world, I

say, and God, who is infinitely more than any finite system of natural facts or of human lives can express. But this distinction between God and world means no separation. Our world is the fragmentary phenomenon that we see. God is the conscious meaning that expresses itself in and through the totality of all phenomena. The world, taken as a mass of happenings in time, of events, of natural processes, of single lives, is nowhere, and at no time, any complete expression of the divine will. But the entire world, of which our known world is a fragment,—the totality of what is, past, present, and future, the totality of what is physical and of what is mental, of what is temporal and of what is enduring,—this entire world is present at once to the eternal divine consciousness as a single whole, and this whole is what the absolute chooses as his own expression, and is what he is conscious of choosing as his own life. In this entire world God sees himself lived out. This world, when taken in its wholeness, is at once the object of the divine knowledge and the deed wherein is embodied the divine will. Like the Logos of the Fourth Gospel, this entire world is not only with God, but is God.

As you see, I state this doctrine, for the moment, quite summarily and dogmatically. Only an extensive and elaborate philosophical discussion could show you why I hold this doctrine to be true. Most of you, however, have heard of some such doctrine as the theory of the Divine Immanence. Some of you are aware that such an interpretation of the nature of God constitutes what is called philosophical Idealism. I am not here defending, nor even expounding, this doctrine. I believe, however, that this is the view of the divine nature which the church has always more or less intuitively felt to be true, and has tried to express, despite the fact that my own formulation of this doctrine includes some features which in the course of the past history of dogma have been upon occasion formally condemned as heresy by various church-authorities. But for my part I had rather be a heretic, and appreciate the vital meaning of what the church has always tried to teach, than accept this or that traditional formulation, but be unable to grasp its religiously significant spirit.

Dogmatically, then, I state what, indeed, if there were time, I ought to expound and to defend on purely rational grounds.

God and his world are one. And this unity is not a dead natural fact. It is the unity of a conscious life, in which, in the course of infinite time, a divine plan, an endlessly complex and yet perfectly definite spiritual idea, gets expressed in the lives of countless finite beings and yet with the unity of a single universal life.

Whoever hears this doctrine stated, asks, however, at once a question,—the deepest, and also the most tragic question of our present poor human existence: Why, then, if the world is the divine life embodied, is there so much evil in it,—so much darkness, ignorance, misery, disappointment, warfare, hatred, disease, death?—in brief, why is the world as we know it full of the unreasonable? Are all these gloomy facts but illusions, bad dreams of our finite existence,—facts unknown to the very God who is, and who knows, all truth? No,—that cannot be the answer; for then the question would recur: Why are these our endlessly tragic illusions permitted? Why are we allowed by the world-plan to be so unreasonable as to dream these bad dreams which fill our finite life, and which in a way constitute this finite life? And that question would then be precisely equivalent to the former question, and just as hard to solve. In brief, the problem of evil is the great problem that stands between our ordinary finite view and experience of life on the one hand and our consciousness of the reasonableness and the unity of the divine life on the other hand.

Has this problem of evil any solution? I believe that it has a solution, and that this solution has long since been in substance grasped and figured forth in symbolic forms by the higher religious consciousness of our race. This solution, not abstractly stated, but intuitively grasped, has also expressed itself in the lives of the wisest and best of the moral heroes of all races and nations of men. The value of suffering, the good that is at the heart of evil, lies in the spiritual triumphs that the endurance and the overcoming of evil can bring to those who learn the hard, the deep but glorious, lesson of life. And of all the spiritual triumphs that the presence of evil makes possible, the noblest, is that which is won when a man is ready, not merely to bear the ills of fortune tranquilly if they come, as the Stoic moralists required their followers to do, but when one is willing to suffer

vicariously, freely, devotedly, ills that he might have avoided, but that the cause to which he is loyal, and the errors and sins that he himself did not commit, call upon him to suffer in order that the world may be brought nearer to its destined union with the divine. In brief, as the mystics themselves often have said, sorrow,—wisely encountered and freely borne,—is one of the most precious privileges of the spiritual life. There is a certain lofty peace in triumphing over sorrow, which brings us to a consciousness of whatever is divine in life, in a way that mere joy, untroubled and unwon, can never make known to us. Perfect through suffering,—that is the universal, the absolutely necessary law of the higher spiritual life. It is a law that holds for God and for man, for those amongst men who have already become enlightened through learning the true lessons of their own sorrows, and for those who full of hope still look forward to a life from which they in the main anticipate joy and worldly success, and who have yet to learn that the highest good of life is to come to them through whatever willing endurance of hardness they, as good soldiers of their chosen loyal service, shall learn to choose or to endure as their offering to their sacred cause. This doctrine that I now state to you is indeed no ascetic doctrine. It does not for a moment imply that joy is a sin, or an evil symptom. What it does assert is that as long as the joys and successes which you seek are expected and sought by you simply as good fortune, which you try to win through mere cleverness—through mere technical skill in the arts of controlling fortune,—so long, I say, as this is your view of life, you know neither God's purpose nor the truth about man's destiny. Our always poor and defective skill in controlling fortune is indeed a valuable part of our reasonableness, since it is the natural basis upon which a higher spiritual life may be built. Hence the word, "Young men, be strong," and the common-sense injunction, "Be skilful, be practical," are good counsel. And so health, and physical prowess, and inner cheerfulness, are indeed wisely viewed as natural foundations for a higher life. But the higher life itself begins only when your health and your strength and your skill and your good cheer appear to you merely as talents, few or many, which you propose to devote, to surrender, to the divine order, to what-

ever ideal cause most inspires your loyalty, and gives sense and divine dignity to your life,—talents, I say, that you intend to return to your master with usury. And the work of the higher life consists, not in winning good fortune, but in transmuting all the transient values of fortune into eternal values. This you best do when you learn by experience how your worst fortune may be glorified, through wise resolve, and through the grace that comes from your conscious union with the divine, into something far better than any good fortune could give to you; namely, into a knowledge of how God himself endures evil, and triumphs over it, and lifts it out of itself, and wins it over to the service of good.

The true and highest values of the spiritual world consist, I say, in the triumph over suffering, over sorrow, and over unreasonableness, and the triumph over these things may appear in our human lives in three forms: First, as mere personal fortitude,—as the stoical virtues in their simplest expression. The stoical virtues are the most elementary stage of the higher spiritual life. Fortitude is indeed required of every conscious agent who has control over himself at all. And fortitude, even in this simplest form as manly and strenuous endurance, teaches you eternal values that you can never learn unless you first meet with positive ills of fortune, and then force yourself to bear them in the loyal service of your cause. Willing endurance of suffering and grief is the price that you have to pay for conscious fidelity to any cause that is vast enough to be worthy of the loyalty of a lifetime. And thus no moral agent can be made perfect except through suffering borne in the service of his cause. Secondly, the triumph over suffering appears in the higher form of that conscious union with the divine plan which occurs when you learn that love, and loyalty, and the idealizing of life, and the most precious and sacred of all human relationships, are raised to their highest levels, are glorified, only when we not merely learn in our own personal case to suffer, to sorrow, to endure, and be spiritually strong, but when we learn to do these things together with our own brethren. For the comradeship of those who willingly not merely practise fortitude as a private virtue but as brethren in sorrow is a deeper, a sweeter, a more blessed

comradeship than ever is that of the lovers who have not yet been tried so as by fire. Then the deepest trials of life come to you and your friend together, and when, after the poor human heart has indeed endured what for the time it is able to bear of anguish, it finds its little moment of rest, and when you are able once more to clasp the dear hand that would help if it could, and to look afresh into your friend's eyes and to see there the light of love as you could never see it before,—then, even in the darkness of this world, you catch some faint far-off glimpse of how the spirit may yet triumph despite all, and of why sorrow may reveal to us, as we sorrow and endure together, what we should never have known of life, and of love, and of each other, and of the high places of the spirit, if this cup had been permitted to pass from us. But thirdly, and best, the triumph of the spirit over suffering is revealed to us not merely when we endure, when we learn through sorrow to prize our brethren more, and when we learn to see new powers in them and even in our poor selves, powers such as only sorrow could bring to light,—but when we also turn back from such experiences to real life again, remembering that sorrow's greatest lesson is the duty of offering ourselves more than ever to the practical service of some divine cause in this world. When one is stung to the heart and seemingly wholly overcome by the wounds of fortune, it sometimes chances that he learns after a while to arise from his agony, with the word: "Well then, if, whether by my own fault or without it, I must descend into hell, I will remember that in this place of sorrow there are the other souls in torment, seeking light; I will help them to awake and arise. As I enter I will open the gates of hell that they may go forth." Whatever happens to me, I say, this is a possible result of sorrow. I have known those men and women who could learn such a lesson from sorrow and who could practise it. These are the ones who, coming up through great tribulation, show us the highest glimpse that we have in this life of the triumph of the spirit over sorrow. But these are the ones who are willing to suffer vicariously, to give their lives as a ransom for many. These tell us what atonement means.

Well, these are, after all, but glimpses of truth. But they show us why the same law holds for all the highest spiritual

life. They show us that God too must sorrow in order that he may triumph.

Now the true doctrine of the Incarnation and of the Atonement is, in its essence, simply the conception of God's nature which this solution of the problem of evil requires. First, God expresses himself in this world of finitude, incarnates himself in this realm of human imperfection, but does so in order that through finitude and imperfection, and sorrow and temporal loss, he may win in the eternal world (that is, precisely, in the conscious unity of his whole life) his spiritual triumph over evil. In this triumph consists his highest good, and ours. It is God's true and eternal triumph that speaks to us through the well-known word: "In this world ye shall have tribulation. But fear not; I have overcome the world." Mark, I do not say that we, just as we naturally are, are already the true and complete incarnation of God. No, it is in overcoming evil, in rising above our natural unreasonableness, in looking towards the divine unity, that we seek what Eckhart so well expressed when he said, Let God be born in the soul. Hence the doctrine of the incarnation is no doctrine of the natural divinity of man. It is the doctrine which teaches that the world-will desires our unity with the universal purpose, that God will be born in us and through our consent, that the whole meaning of our life is that it shall transmute transient and temporal values into eternal meanings. Humanity becomes conscious God incarnate only in so far as humanity looks godwards; that is, in the direction of the whole unity of the rational spiritual life.

And now, secondly, the true doctrine of the atonement seems to me simply this: We, as we temporally and transiently are, are destined to win our union with the divine only through learning to triumph over our own evil, over the griefs of fortune, over the unreasonableness and the sin that now beset us. This conquest we never accomplish alone. As the mother that bore you suffered, so the world suffers for you and through and in you until you win your peace in union with the divine will. Upon such suffering you actually depend for your natural existence, for the toleration which your imperfect self constantly demands from the world, for the help that your helplessness so often needs. When you sorrow, then, remember that God sorrows,—sorrows in you, since in all

your finitude you still are part of his life; sorrows for you, since it is the intent of the divine spirit, in the plan of its reasonable world, that you should not remain what you now are; and sorrows, too, in waiting for your higher fulfilment, since indeed the whole universe needs your spiritual triumph for the sake of its completion.

On the other hand, this doctrine of the atonement means that there is never any completed spiritual triumph over sorrow which is not accompanied with the willingness to suffer vicariously; that is, with the will not merely to endure bravely, but to force one's very sorrow to be an aid to the common cause of all mankind, to give one's life as a ransom for one's cause, to use one's bitterest and most crushing grief as a means towards the raising of all life to the divine level. It is not enough to endure. Your duty is to make your grief a source of blessing. Thus only can sorrow bring you into conscious touch with the universal life.

Now all this teaching is old. The church began to learn its own version of this solution of the problem of evil when first it sorrowed over its lost master; when first it began to say: "It was needful that Christ should suffer"; when first in vision and in legend it began to conceive its glorified Lord. When later it said, "In the God-man Christ God suffered, once for all and in the flesh, to save us; in him alone the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," the forms of its religious imagination were transient, but the truth of which these forms were the symbol was everlasting. And we sum up this truth in two theses: First, God wins perfection through expressing himself in a finite life and triumphing over and through its very finitude. And secondly, Our sorrow is God's sorrow. God means to express himself by winning us through the very triumph over evil to unity with the perfect life, and therefore our fulfilment, like our existence, is due to the sorrow and the triumph of God himself. These two theses express, I believe, what is vital in Christianity.