

## ***LOST CHRISTIANITY***

### **Preface to the J.P. Tarcher Edition**

*Do you wish to know God? Learn first to know yourself.*  
*--Abba Evagrius the Monk*

Never in recent memory has the world been at once so deeply drawn toward religion and so troubled about it. As is now clear, all self-assured predictions that the march of modern science would marginalize religion have proved false. As far as Christianity, Judaism and Islam are concerned, we are, on the contrary, in a period of religious expansion throughout the Americas, Africa, the Middle East and southeast Asia. At the same time, it is clear that with the very survival of our civilization hanging in the balance, the question relentlessly insists itself: is religion a force for good or ill in the life of humanity? Does the actual influence of religion in fact sometimes intensify the very defilements of human nature—ignorance, fear, hatred—from which its doctrines and practices are intended to liberate us?

As once again we witness the horrific engines of war being fueled by religious zeal of one kind or another, and under one kind of name or another, the answer to this question seems obviously to be: Yes, sometimes; Yes, often! Have not the darkest crimes of world history—the insane barbarism of genocide, the bloody crusades, the murder of innocents and the depredation of defenseless cultures-- have not many, if not most of these crimes been committed under the banner of religion or through a quasi-religious frenzy attaching itself to religious ideals? Put next to these endlessly recurrent horrors, the intimate comforts of personal religious faith and the day-to-day individual efforts to

live religiously may seem to count for little in the balance scales of human life on earth. Little wonder, then, that so many of the best minds of the modern era entirely rejected religion as a foundation for both ethics and knowledge. Just as the scientific turn of mind seemed to have entirely eclipsed religion's claim to *knowledge*, so—it has seemed to many—the same modern turn of mind must inevitably displace religion's claim to *moral authority*. Just as religion can no longer show us what is *true*, but must yield that task to methods of thought that are independent of religious doctrine, so neither can religion, it was claimed, show us what is *good*, but must now surrender that task as well to the secular mind of modernity.

But in fact, no such assumption of moral authority by secular humanism, has taken hold or now seems in any way likely or justified. The modern era, the era of science, while witnessing the phenomenal acceleration of scientific discovery and its applications in technological innovation, has brought the world the inconceivable slaughter and chaos of modern war along with the despair of ethical dilemmas arising from new technologies that all at once project humanity's essence-immorality onto the entire planet: global injustice, global heartlessness and the global disintegration of the normal patterns of life that have guided mankind for millenia. Neither the secular philosophies of our epoch nor its theories of human nature—pragmatism, positivism, Marxism, liberalism, humanism, behaviorism, biological determinism, psychoanalysis--nor the traditional doctrines of the religions, in the way we have understood them, seem able to confront or explain the crimes of humanity in our era, nor offer wise and compassionate guidance through the labyrinth of paralyzingly new ethical problems.

What is needed is either a new understanding of God or a new understanding of Man: an understanding of God that does not insult the scientific mind, while offering bread, not a stone, to the deepest hunger of the heart; or an understanding of Man that squarely faces the criminal weakness of our moral will while holding out to us the knowledge of how we can strive within ourselves to become the fully human being we are meant to be-- both for ourselves and as instruments of a higher purpose.

But, this is not an either/or. The premise –or, rather, the proposal—of this book is that at the heart of the Christian religion there exists and has always existed just such a vision of both God and Man. I call it “lost Christianity” not because it is a matter of doctrines and concepts that may have been lost or forgotten; nor even a matter of methods of spiritual practice that may need to be recovered from ancient sources. It is all that, to be sure, but what is lost in the whole of our modern life, including our understanding of religion, is something even more fundamental, *without which religious ideas and practices lose their meaning and all too easily become the instruments of ignorance, fear and hatred*. What is lost is the experience of oneself, just oneself—myself, the personal being who is here, now, living, breathing, yearning for meaning, for goodness; just this person here, now, squarely confronting one’s own existential weaknesses and pretensions while yet aware, however tentatively, of a higher current of life and identity calling to us from within ourselves. This presence to oneself is the missing element in the whole of the life of Man, the intermediate state of consciousness between what we are meant to be and what we actually are. It is, perhaps, the one bridge that can lead us from our inhuman past toward the human future.

In the writings and utterances of the great teachers of Christianity over the centuries one may begin to discern, like a photographic image gradually developing before one's eyes, the outlines of this vision of what is called in this book "intermediate Christianity." But modern man can no longer perceive that vision or hear the language that has been associated with it. Words like "humility," "purity of heart," "contrition," are no longer understood to require the individual, existential struggle for what the early Fathers called "attention in oneself." On the contrary, it is assumed that such qualities of character can be ours in the distracted and dispersed state of being that is more and more characteristic of life in the contemporary world. The result is self-deception which masks and perhaps even intensifies our weaknesses and which inevitably leads to the disillusionment with religious ideals that has been one of the hallmarks of the modern, secular world-view. Of course, the modernist attempt to establish ethical life without religion, itself ignores the same lost element in human life that has been forgotten in the conventional understanding of religion. The result is often a sad ineffectuality under the name of rousing moral formulae—or, ironically, the decay of what began in opposition to perceived religious tyranny into its own brand of quasi-religious dogmatism and violence—as witnessed in the fate of communist ideology.

Whether it is conventional religion or secular humanism, or any other modern program of morality and inner human betterment, the question remains: can there be any hope of our becoming what we are meant to be without first becoming fully and deeply aware of what we in fact are, now, here, in just this moment of our lives? Whether religious or not, is there any hope for man who has lost the capacity or forgotten the need to know himself and to be alive and present in himself?

The great ideas and ideals of Christianity continue to offer hope and comfort to the world, as do the ideals of Judaism and Islam—and of all the world’s great religions. And as do the ideals of humanistic morality with its passionate commitment to justice and human rights. Yet we see, we see, we cannot help but see that now, as ever, something is missing, something has been forgotten about ourselves and in ourselves. Our children see it as clearly as we sometimes do; *more* clearly! The words of St. Paul never sounded more distinctly as they do now in the lengthening shadows of our civilization:

*For the good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do...who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*

Romans: 7