

ASPECTS OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

SOME BRIEF REFLECTIONS

C F D MOULE

In what follows, no attempt is made to discuss Christian beliefs comprehensively. The heart of the Christian good news, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, is taken as said. These are no more than spontaneous reflections of one elderly believer. They carry the authority only of the sources and the arguments specified; they make no claim to be rigorously academic, properly documented, or thorough. But perhaps they may serve to stimulate reflections in the reader, and lead to some degree of clarification. I owe many thanks to my nephew, Patrick Moule, for patiently transcribing them from my manuscript.

C.F.D.Moule, October 2004

1. After Death, what?
2. The Great Tribunal
3. The Resurrection of Jesus
4. The Language of Christian Experience
5. The Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ
6. The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity
7. The Problem of Evil: Some Tentative Thoughts of a Perplexed Bible-reader
8. Christianity among World Religions
9. The Bible and the Guidance of God
10. Prayer
11. The Sacraments
12. Solitary and Collective in the Christian Church
13. The Treatment of Offenders
14. Sunday

1. After Death, what?

In some forms of the Eucharistic liturgy in the Christian Church, worshippers are called upon to join in the triumphant cry: 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.' The first clause, as a literal, prose statement, is as well evidenced as any item in history. The second, startling though it may be, is, as we shall see, surprisingly difficult to deny. Of the third, the very meaning is enigmatic.

A recent book, *Hope against Hope*, by Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart (Eerdmans, 1999), observes that readers of the Bible, as much as of any other literature, need to be alert so as to recognise when it is plain, factual prose and when it is something else - poetry, symbolic speech, metaphor, parable, myth and so forth. Of course that in itself does not justify us in arbitrarily choosing, for our own convenience, to interpret what was *meant* as literal truth as something, instead, which we need not accept literally. But it might mean that, if what was originally meant literally is no longer credible, it might be allowed to suggest, for us, a way forward in our thinking.

What, then, may 'Christ will come again' mean for us? The 'Synoptic' Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) represent Jesus himself as saying that, though the day and hour were known only to God, it would happen within his own generation (Mark 13:30-33, etc. St John's Gospel has its own equivalent: 14:2 f., 28, 16:16). Since that time, two millennia have passed, and cosmology has seen the cosy world of earth, sun, moon and stars expand to the mind-boggling dimensions of what the space craft Hubble can see - with more still to come. Was Christ mistaken? If he was, that is no reason to give up the central conviction of the Christian creed - that in Jesus of Nazareth God was incarnate (that is, enfleshed), meaning that, uniquely, Jesus was both perfectly human and perfectly divine. To be perfectly human is, most emphatically, *not* to be omniscient or infallible, though to be a perfectly divine man must mean a uniquely perfect perception of what divine love means.

However, even if we were to allow that, through a human error, the earliest expectations merely got the time-scale wrong, that, by itself, would not solve the problems. There are indeed signs that St Paul, while starting with the expectation that he would still be alive at the 'return' of Christ, began later to change his mind: contrast 1 Cor. 15:51, 'we shall not all die' (literally 'sleep'), and 1 Thess. 4:15, 'we who are left alive', with 2 Cor. 5:1 ff. A little later, 2 Pet. 3:4 ff. is clearly fighting a rearguard action against what, by that time, had become loud cries of ridicule against the whole idea of Christ's return. But by our day, any theory of mere postponement has become farcical. Besides this, the very concept of lapse of time *beyond death* is itself problematical. (What might be meant when, in 1 Pet. 3:19 f., we are told that, between his death and resurrection, Christ 'went and preached to the spirits in prison'? See also 4:6.)

What are the implications of the belief - which we shall consider further directly - that Christ alone has already been raised from death, while the rest of us must 'await' his return? We have recently been forcefully recalled to the fact that this is the standard New Testament faith. Already, Dr C. Cocksworth had noted it in *Prayer and the Departed* (Grove Books, 1997); and now we have the massive and learned *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (S.P.C.K., 2003) from Dr. N. T. Wright, now Bishop of Durham.

Whatever we make of the difficult concept of 'waiting' after death, as though in some sort of limbo, the idea of a 'general resurrection at the end', as a single, simultaneous event yet to be realised, points to the vital belief that there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. Even the strictest of hermits is spiritually part of the 'Body' of Christ.

Christian reality has to accommodate itself *both* to a deeply individual and personal relation

to God *and* to a constant concern for collective and universal unity. More still, as Rom. 8:22 f. implies, (and compare Eph. 1:20 ff.), our completion is bound up, in the purposes of God, with the renewal of all creation. All alike 'waiting' to the end is a powerful symbol of this conviction. There is a hint of this also when we are told in Heb. 11:39 f. that the heroes of the Old Covenant cannot be completed until the faithful Christians of the New Covenant have fulfilled their destiny; and it is possible that something of the same principle appears when St. Paul speaks (perhaps?) of his contribution to the completing of the necessary tale of sufferings (Col. 1:24), and the waiting martyrs in Rev. 6:10 f. are told that their vindication must await the completion of the destined number of martyrs. In short, when the New Testament speaks of 'the End' as a single event, that is an intelligible message about a great collective and all-inclusive event.

Christians often - perhaps more often than not - think of death as the gateway directly into their ultimate destiny, 'eternal' life. '*Mors Janua Vitae*', 'Death the Gateway to Life', is inscribed on crematorium gateways. But the New Testament demands that we take seriously a two-stage process - first to 'sleeping' or 'being with Christ', and only after that to resurrection, to the remaking of ourselves, at 'the End'. It is Christ Jesus alone who has already been 'raised' from death into bodily life, but bodily life of some mysterious new kind. To think of death as the gateway immediately to our ultimate fulfilment is nearer to the essentially 'pagan' dualism, which sees an individual person as a self entrapped in a body, so that at death it is released from the body, like a bird from a cage, and simply goes on living. By contrast, the Jewish-Christian doctrine of the remaking after death of the whole person goes with belief in a Creator, for whom re-making, re-creating, is the climax of the pattern of salvation.

Salvation? But what of hell?

2. The Great Tribunal.

There are clear statements in the New Testament that it is God's desire that everyone should have life. The best known is in John 3:16: 'God loved the world so much (or 'in such a way') that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him should not die but have eternal life', also v.17: 'it was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved'. There is also 1 Tim. 2:3 f.: '...God our Saviour, whose will it is that all men should find salvation and come to know the truth'.

Over against such statements, one can collect statements not only about the severity of God's judgments, but about their punitive and retributive character. To take a random example, St Paul speaks in Rom. 1:18 of 'divine....retribution falling upon all the godless wickedness of men'. In the Gospels there are parables attributed to Jesus which give the same impression. In the Lucan story of the rich man who disregarded the beggar at his door, in the after-life the beggar is seen in the distance, enjoying a feast with Abraham, while the rich man is in torment (Lk 16:22 f.). In the Matthean story of the sheep and the goats, the 'goats' are sentenced to torment, while the 'sheep' enter into joy because they are the people who were sensitive to the needs of the poor and distressed: in helping them, they had been doing it to Christ himself (Matt. 25:41). In Revelation, the retributive theme reaches a white-hot fury, especially in chapters 19 and 20, with the Great White Throne and the lake of fire and the eternal torment of the devil and his angels. In Rev. 16:6 the vindictive cry is heard: 'they deserve it'. (See further such passages as Matt. 12:31, 2 Tim 4:14, 1 John 5:16.)

On the other hand, St Paul is famous for his teaching of 'acquittal' for the guilty who renounce all claim to being worthy, and simply trust in the forgiveness which is offered to them, although of course the guilty must be genuinely penitent - that is part of 'trust' or 'faith'.

Perplexingly, there are also references to being already 'in the book of life', meaning, it would seem, that such a one is declared acquitted and rendering the final judgment superfluous. (See Phil. 4:3, Rev. 3:5, 13:8, 17: 8, 20:12, 15, 21:27 - though the references in Ch. 20 might mean that the name is entered in the book *on acquittal* before the throne.)

Whatever the uncertainties, however, in this pattern of hope and apprehension, the central conviction is that God is love, which, though it cannot for a moment imply that God condones evil (quite the reverse!), does mean that the love of God is not revengeful but is a redemptive force which never fails to offer reconciliation - the very meaning of the Cross.

Perhaps one needs to lean heavily on what is axiomatic. It is axiomatic that love, by definition, can never force itself on anyone: it can be accepted freely or not at all. Otherwise, it would not be love. If, then, there is anybody who stubbornly persists in rejecting the approaches of pure love, it is theoretically conceivable that such a person might ultimately become too calloused to be *able* to receive love, even though love cannot cease to offer itself. Therefore, never to doubt the love of God, but always to be on the watch as to one's response, would seem to be the right approach to the question of heaven and hell.

Perhaps this is as far as we can go for the time being, in contemplating the meaning of 'Christ will come again'. What, now, for 'Christ is risen'?

3. The Resurrection of Jesus.

That Jesus was put to death by the appalling cruelty of crucifixion, was wrapped in grave-cloths and laid in a tomb, there is no doubt: all four Canonical Gospels and 1 Cor. 11 are unanimous; and given the circumstances, there is nothing improbable in the story, unless it be that Jesus is said to have died more quickly than the average tortured victim. (See Mark 15:44 f., and John 19:33.) What is startling is the tradition that, after two nights had passed, the tomb was found empty, and he was seen alive and, according to some accounts, even touched by some of his followers, and seen eating food; yet, also that he seemed in some ways to be different - not always immediately recognised, and able, it would seem, to appear and disappear at will. According to Luke and the Acts, after appearing intermittently for a period, he was raised to heaven, and destined to come again. (See Matt. 28:8-10, Lk. 24:13-50, John 20:14-29, 21:4-22, with numerous references in Acts: 1:3-11, 2:31-36, 3:15,26, 4:10, 5:30, 10:40 f., 13:30,33,37, 17:31, 23:6, 25:19, 26:23.)

Admittedly, these traditions are by no means without their difficulties. They do not agree in details, and the oft-repeated suggestion that this only shows that they are not fabricated, because, had the story been made up, care would have been taken to see that it was self-consistent, only works if they were all the work of a single narrator or of writers working in mutual collaboration, which is clearly not the case. Also, there is the curious question, where did our Lord get the clothes to wear? That may seem frivolous, but it is a genuinely teasing problem. However, there is the weighty witness of St Paul in 1 Cor. 15, where he recites traditions already current before his own startling U-turn from persecutor of Christians to devoted follower of Christ. St Paul's are thus the very earliest traditions we have, and are clearly independent of the Gospels. It is significant, too, that St Paul himself claims to be one of the eye-witnesses (though peculiar, as a kind of after-thought or irregular birth, much later than the original witnesses). He insists on distinguishing *visual* encounter, to which he here refers, from *visionary* experience: contrast 1 Cor. 15:8-11 and 9:1 with 2 Cor. 12:2-5. (But what do we make of Gal. 1:1,16?)

But, above all (a matter emphasised by Dr N. T. Wright in his major study, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (S.P.C.K. 2003)), there seems to be no plausible explanation for the very

origin of the Christian Church and for its development and survival as an independent body, except its foundational distinctiveness. We know well enough that certain Jewish groups, in particular the Pharisees, as attested by the Gospels and the Acts, believed that there was to be a general resurrection at 'the End'; but only Christians believed that one man alone, Jesus the Messiah, had already been raised from death - the sole forerunner and 'first-fruits' of the general resurrection. This belief seems to be without parallel, and inexplicable unless based on fact. Accordingly, it is irresponsible just to dismiss it as 'legend'. This is still not to deny that language swings between plain prose and many other levels of meaning. To say that the risen Christ was raised 'to the right hand of God' or that he 'ascended into heaven', is the language of devotion, compatible with a foundation of plain prose, and, indeed, part of the Christian's interpretation of its meaning.

4. The Language of Christian Experience.

In an earlier study we noted that contemporary writers had recalled us to a basic New Testament pattern of Christian belief in which Jesus Christ alone of all human beings had been raised from death to life almost immediately after death. For the rest of us, whatever we might believe about what was immediately to follow death, there would be no resurrection until 'the Last Day', when Jesus was to 'come again'. If at first this 'return' of Christ was expected very soon, it is now clear, after two millennia (if not after a century), that the language of devotion must change; but it was noted that, nevertheless, the concept of 'waiting' after death for a simultaneous *general* resurrection at 'the Last day' carried a vital message. We had already noted that there was a rich diversity in the language of religion, and that some never can be treated as factual prose. We need to be on the alert to words which are poetical, symbolical, parabolic, and so on; and we noted that one vital message from the idea of a resurrection 'postponed' to the end - no matter what we may say about the difficulties of any concept of the lapse of time in 'the beyond' - was that God's plan of salvation was collective and communal, not solitary; the life of 'the world to come' is a great climax of festive celebration: we are members together of a single great community - limbs of the very Body of Christ himself. We cannot go forward alone - indeed, we are bound even to the remaking of the rest of creation and of what we have come to call 'the environment'.

Meanwhile, however, to use (if we must) the language of time, there is a special kind of life to be lived after death, and a special range of language is employed by the New Testament. A common description of death, carried over from the language of the Hebrew Scriptures, ('slept with his fathers', etc.) is *sleep*. Stephen the Christian martyr 'fell asleep' (Acts 7:60 in the Greek). When St Paul is musing on the possibility of living on until the 'return' of Christ, he says 'we shall not all sleep' (1 Cor. 15:51); in another context (Rom. 14:8 f.) he says, either way, 'whether we wake or sleep' we all belong together to the Lord; and yet again, when wondering whether his own death is imminent, he declares he does not know which to choose - to be '*with Christ*' which is by far the better, or to live on (Phil. 1:23 f.). According to St Luke, the Lord on the cross says to the man on the next cross, 'today you shall be with me in Paradise', that is, in a place of peace and beauty (Lk, 23:43).

Thus, much Christian metaphorical language speaks of a kind of oblivion or of an intensified presence with Christ. Either way, we have to come to terms with the language of the lapse of time in the hereafter, which itself is not easy. 1 Peter 3:19 speaks strangely, as we have seen, of Christ, between death and resurrection, going and preaching to 'the spirits in prison' (and compare 4:6).

More than this, the fervent language of devotional life ranges through the concept of 'death' with Christ *before* 'life', to being with him in the hereafter: Col. 3:3 f.: '...you died; and now your life lies hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is manifested, then you

too will be manifested with him in glory (so, too, 1 Thess. 4:14, explicitly). Again, Gal. 2:19 f.: '...Through the law I died to law - to live for God. I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me: and my present bodily life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me'.

Then, in 2 Cor. 5:1 ff. we find St Paul wrestling with an extraordinary weave of ideas related to metaphors of changing abodes or changing garments (compare 2 Pet. 1:13 f.): we already have a heavenly dwelling; we wish it could be put over us (like a tent, perhaps, or an outer garment?), rather than our having to suffer the discomfort of taking something off, in exchange for something else, and risking the horror of nakedness. Yet, we know that to be in the present abode or covering is to be away from the Lord, and to be away from it and present with the Lord is better - a momentary flash of 'pagan' dualism? In the yearning to *add* rather than *exchange*, there is possibly a recollection of 1 Cor. 15:54 where indeed there is no divesting: 'Death is *swallowed up*....'.

In a different idiom, there is the jubilant expectation expressed in 1 Pet. 1:3-12 looking forward rapturously to seeing the unseen but beloved Lord - words caught up in Ray Palmer's hymn of adoration, 'Jesus, these eyes have never seen / That radiant form of Thine....'.

We could go on, but this is enough to give us a glimpse into a vibrant language of faith and hope, which it would be impossible to build prosaically into a totally coherent and wholly self-consistent statement. It would seem that, in these great tides of devotion, it is right for us to swing at anchor on the great, basic verities - a situation referred to so memorably in Heb. 6:19 f. Is it not firm anchorage enough to know that if God continues to own us, we are alive? 'God....said, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"....God is not the God of the dead but of the living' (Mark 12:26).

5. The Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

Of the millions who know something about Jesus of Nazareth and admire him as one of the spiritual giants, it is a fair guess that the majority think of him as 'inspired' - exceptionally 'full' of the Spirit of God. Why do Christians go further? The Christian conviction does not stop short of 'incarnation', a word strictly meaning that in Jesus God became flesh. It was not just that the Spirit of God as it were 'entered the human being', but that the whole person was God. Not that the whole of God (to speak in crude quantitative terms) was 'in' Jesus, but that the whole of Jesus was God.

The term 'incarnation' is not always so limited. It is used in English language descriptions of Hinduism in senses nearer to inspiration. But in Christian technical usage it is carefully limited and distinguished.

So, where has so extraordinary a conviction arisen? What could be more implausible than that a single individual of a particular sex and citizenship and period and place - a Jewish male of first-century Galilee - should be 'one' with God?

That so extraordinary a belief did arise makes it, paradoxically, the harder to disbelieve. Everything was hostile to its genesis. The Jewish monotheistic tradition was intolerant of identifying man with God. The Pharisaic thinkers believed in an embodied life beyond death, but not until the End, the Climax of the divine plan. Yet here was a group of Jews whose most authentic traditions, in the New Testament, show that in Jesus they had found one who, during his lifetime, brought with him a powerful sense of divine presence, and who, after his terrible death and entombment, was seen alive - perhaps even touched - *already*, only two nights later. All this is flat contrary to their traditions, and the last thing one would

expect to be fabricated.

Moreover, without these bizarre and unlikely convictions, there would have been no distinctive Christian group. Even though the narratives in the Gospels and the Acts do not add up to a self-consistent, smoothly-reading story, it is very difficult to believe that such a series of alien ideas was arbitrarily invented. In addition, St Paul who, in 1 Cor. 15, gives us the earliest traditions of all, as he received them, is able to add a statement of his own encounter with the risen Lord, leading to a dramatic about-turn from furious opponent to devoted servant. To dismiss so much smoke without searching for fire is, to say the least, irresponsible.

And here is another point, often overlooked. The liturgical phrase, '*through* Jesus Christ'. scattered through the New Testament, cries out for comment. *Because of* (say) Socrates, I may be a wiser person. But it is *through* Jesus that I am given access to the living God, as through a living presence, not through a past body of teaching.

This experience of access to God through the living Presence is sometimes also expressed in terms of the Spirit of God. In pre-Christian Judaism, God is present among his people as Spirit when he speaks through a prophet or does some striking work of power. In the New Testament, the presence of the risen Christ is sometimes spoken of in terms of the Holy Spirit, especially in Luke and Acts and in the special idiom of St John. This bears independent witness to the same reality.

These few words are but a cockleshell in which to sail fathomless waters. I dare believe they are as seaworthy in construction as a larger craft.

As in previous statements, N.T.Wright's comprehensive writings should be consulted.

6. The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity.

From Anglican pulpits on Trinity Sunday most sermons will declare that Godhead is an impenetrable mystery, but few will attempt to probe it. A popular Trinity hymn is Reginald Heber's 'Holy, holy, holy....', an address to God as he is portrayed in Revelation 4, which, in its turn, draws upon the triple acclamation in Isaiah 6, and other language of adoration; but again there is no attempt to go further in understanding. However, worship withers and become superstitious unless the convictions behind it are rationally investigated; and while there is much to be said for doing theology on one's knees, so conversely worship gains depth by association with investigation. That a mystery is impenetrable does not exempt the worshipper from trying to understand, and there is nothing irreverent about humble enquiry. Christian belief needs to be constantly under scrutiny. What, then, of the mysterious Doctrine of the Trinity?

The Christian creeds start with the affirmation that the God we worship is the Almighty Creator, alone, without rival. So in the Hebrew Scriptures, Deut. 6:4 declares the Hebrews' God to be one, in deliberate contradiction of competing polytheisms such as are reflected, sometimes without disapproval, in other parts of those same Scriptures. For instance, in psalm 82, the High God appears to be presiding over an assembly of the gods. It is a great step forward when there emerges a clear belief in a one and only God, and this great faith is particularly associated with the later stages of the Hebrew religion, though we are told of an earlier sign of it in the 14th century B.C., when the Egyptian King Akhnaton worshipped the Sun alone. Much later, in the 7th century A.D., Mohammed introduced his special type of monotheism.

After the emergence of Hebrew monotheism, however, comes the distinctive creed of Christianity, often severely criticised by the other monotheistic faiths. The Christian creeds, starting from common ground, immediately introduce highly distinctive beliefs. A Child was born (in about 6 A.D., as we now reckon years), a Jewish Child, Jesus of Nazareth. He died young, by the terrible death of a Roman crucifixion. By his followers he came to be called 'the Son of God', but - more than that - worshipped as God. In Jewish idiom human individuals could, in certain circumstances, be hailed as 'children of God' without any implication that they were divine. When Hosea 11:1 represents God as calling his son out of Egypt, he is referring simply to the exodus of the Jewish people. But it was amazingly soon that Jesus came not only to be called 'Son of God' or 'the Son of God', but to be worshipped by his followers. There seem to be incipient signs of this attitude even during his lifetime: certainly it was happening shortly after his death. That was an almost unbelievable happening, yet happen it did. The development of belief in Jesus as the 'Christ' or anointed 'Messiah', and then as a divine figure, was spectacularly rapid. The Epistles of the new Testament (mostly earlier than the Gospels) are full of evidence for it. How could this have happened in a monotheism so austere as the Mosaic creed, and in what sense was that creed modified?

Without going into the whole long story, perhaps one of the most revealing facts, as has already been noted, is that, already in the first Christian century, according to the New Testament Epistles, worshippers were finding access to God *through* Jesus Christ (Rom. 5.2) - the formula is frequent. This meant much more than that, by his example and teaching, he had 'explained' or 'shown' God to them, as inspired prophets and preachers had done. It was not just because of what he had taught them: it was *through* him, as through an invisibly present, living Person, that they found themselves in the presence of God. Their prayer and praise and their very selves went to God *through* him - which means that, though distinguished from God, he was not separable from God. St John's Gospel phrases it 'I and the Father are one' (10:30). It is a duality that does not destroy the unity. Conversely, according to St Paul in 1 Cor 2, it is through the Holy Spirit that God converses with humans. The Spirit is distinguishable from God but not separable from him: the Spirit is, as it were, the self consciousness of God, entering our consciousness (1 Cor. 2:11). Thus God Almighty, the Son of God and the Spirit of God are all one, but distinguishable aspects of the Unity; and this three-fold analysis, so far from pluralising the one God and contradicting monotheism, offers an insight into the one God's mode of being single and acting as single. It has to be recognised that, in the New Testament, this analysis is not rigid or mechanical. There are passages, for example Rom. 8:9-11, where 'Christ' and 'the Spirit' are used almost interchangeably; but that the New Testament uses 'the Spirit' simply as a name for the risen Christ is not true. The two are usually given distinguishable roles - a fact which throws important light on the nature of the Trinity.

Thus the unity of God is revealed as a rich unity. The Deity is not a Being with, as it were, a uniform 'texture', but a vibrating, living unity, in dialogue with itself (as is a human person, on a miniature scale) and with others. This analogy of the human individual's inward dialogue was used from early days. One might also perhaps take, as a parable (no more) of the plural unity of God, the plural unity of the physicist's matter - single, yet when hugely magnified, found to be a shimmering assembly of dancing particles, like small-scale stellar systems; or one might think, perhaps, of white light with its spectrum of colours; or perhaps of music harmonised.

The Christian threefold analysis of the living unity of God is thus very far from suggesting merely that God is a 'composition' (!) of three parts: nothing could be a less apt parable than the shamrock attributed to the preaching of St Patrick.

Similarly, we must be cautious of laying too much weight on the three men of Gen. 18, or the triple formula of adoration in Isa. 6, the 'thrice holy', or even, striking as they are, the triplets

of the New Testament - 1 Cor. 12:4ff., 2 Cor. 13:13, Eph. 4:4-6, 2 Thess. 2:13f., 1Tim. 5:21, 1 Pet. 1:2, Rev. 1:4f. These deserve careful consideration and may indeed be signs of an emerging sense of a threefold structure in the divine unity, but they do not, in themselves, constitute a doctrinally conceived statement of the tri-unity in the being of God. Even the baptismal formula of Matt. 28:19, anticipating the universal Christian usage, is not necessarily thus truly doctrinal. The language of a properly doctrinal understanding was forged after the New Testament in the complex debates of the following centuries, in the acrimonious Church Councils and the vast so-called 'patristic' literature - the mainly Greek and Latin writings of the Church 'fathers'. It is this long-continued debate that issued in the successive creeds of the various Councils, with their anathemas against recusants - the leaders of heresies whom modern research sometimes shows not actually themselves to have held the doctrines attributed to their followers.

But one still asks: Why the number three? One can understand, at least to some extent, the subtle conception of a plural singularity; but if plural, why *three*? Why not limit the plurality to two, or, alternatively, not limit it at all?

Furthermore, it is difficult to recognise 'spirit' - a term that seems in this context less obviously personal than Father and Son - as an equal 'member' of the divine trinity; but such is the majority belief in centuries of profound reflection. And it may be worthwhile to note that Dorothy Sayers was not only a superlative writer of detective novels in a class of her own, nor only an innovative, self-taught translator of Dante, but also the author of a penetrating study of the nature of creative art, visual or literary (*The Mind of the Maker* (originally London: Methuen, 1942; reprinted subsequently with introduction by Susan Howarth)), which found it to be essentially threefold in structure, in a way relevant to the study of the divine Trinity.

Relevant to these thoughts but beyond the range of the present investigation is the vexed question of gender. Why Father and Son? Why not Father and Mother, and why not Son and Daughter? And is it significant that, in Hebrew, spirit is feminine? (The latter fact is of doubtful value, both because in Latin it is masculine and in Greek neuter, and because in Hebrew feminine and neuter are bracketed together.)

Whatever we make of abstruse questions, and even if we go no further than we have so far gone, we may well find ourselves asking: But does it make a difference whether we are trinitarians or not? It does make a difference, if only in the way in which one approaches God and learns to listen to him and find his will and worship him. The trinitarian 'Gloria', in Christian worship, is infinitely more than a decorative formula. It is a serious reminder of how to grasp, with all God's people, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, for only so shall we be filled up to the full measure of God (Eph. 3:18f.).

What do we make of the following meditation?

I met three children in the street.
They did not give me trick or treat
but whispered, laughed, and called my name.
I nearly walked away,
but something made me stay
and join them in their game.

The second child moved so fast
I hardly saw her spinning past
as all around she sang:
"I'll dance the dance of destiny
till you are all as real as me:
I made you. I know you.
I love you."

"Now let's pretend that we are God,"

they said, and ran to where I stood.
They danced around me in a ring
and sang, "You must agree
to give us questions three,
so ask us anything."

They waited, sitting on the ground,
and did not move or make a sound.
I thought and puzzled long that day,
and then, to my surprise,
I looked into their eyes,
and knew what I would say:

"Now listen to my questions three,"
I said, "and you must answer me:
What is your name? and Are you real?
and *Can you see and know*
how humans think and grow,
and fathom how we feel?"

The first child stood up tall,
and suddenly I felt quite small
as solemnly she said:
"We never give our name away,
but listen hard to what I say:
God is not a she, God is not a he,
God is not an it or a maybe.
God is a moving, loving,
knowing, growing mystery."

The third child took my hand
and whispered "yes, we understand.
I know what children think and do,
for I have been a child like you.
I know how it feels to walk and run,
to sing and shout, and play in the sun,
or cry in the night,
or fall to the ground,
or tremble with fright,
or be lost and found.
I know how it feels to look at the sky
and keep on asking why and why."

I met three children on my way,
and never knew, in all our play,
their age or name or why they came,
yet all the world is new,
and everything I do
will never be the same.

God is not a she,
God is not a he,
God is not an it or a maybe.
God is a moving,
loving,
knowing,
growing
mystery.

Brian Wren, *Piecing Together Praise* (Stainer & Bell, London, and Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, Illinois, USA, 1996, p.167.)

7. The Problem of Evil: Some Tentative Thoughts of a Perplexed Bible-reader.

The unfairness of life is notorious, and notoriously there is no satisfactory explanation. Frequently, the best people suffer horribly, while the least deserving get away with it. The poet of Psalm 73 knows all about that (verses 2-12). Were the sufferers, then, wicked in some previous life, and are they paying for it now? That will not satisfy a Christian investigator, since there is no room for reincarnation in a Christian creed. Again, even if you promise the sufferer compensation in a future life (like Lazarus in Luke 16), there is still no answer to why a person should suffer undeservedly in any life.

There are promises in the Bible that those who pray resolutely enough will be rescued from their distress - Matt. 7:7-11, Luke 18:1-8, and a great deal besides; and there is ample supply of stories to illustrate this faith, in Exodus, Joshua and Judges, Daniel, the Gospels and elsewhere. But, as Hebrews 11:36-38 confesses realistically, there seems to be no consistency about this: some are relieved, some simply are not. In the wonderful saga of Joseph, Gen. 37 and 39-45, the upright man suffers but eventually comes out on top; but

that is by no means always the story.

In any case, quite apart from the matter of unfairness and inconsistency, where does evil and unfair suffering come from? The story in Gen. 3, taken up by St Paul in Rom. 5:12-14, traces it to a primal disobedience in the first couple of human beings. But not many today could take on board the idea of a genetically transmitted evil will; and in any case Gen. 3 offers no answer to the question where the serpent came from, whose evil persuasiveness did the damage. The Book of Job has an introduction and a termination in prose, telling us that God inflicted misery on a blameless man, just to prove to 'the Satan', the Public Accuser in the divine assembly, that Job really was a disinterested worshipper; but what sort of answer is that, and what sort of God does it reflect? In the body of the book, the great poem with Job's impassioned complaint, the answer finally vouchsafed by God is to call attention to the strangeness of some of the marvellous things in creation - ostrich, hippopotamus, crocodile, the storm, the dawn, and so forth. Does that really help someone *in extremis*?

Yet, if there is no coherent answer to the problem, there are some considerations that may mitigate our sense of outrage.

1) One may ask, Can one imagine any sort of personal existence that would be preferable to what at present obtains? Is there anything more precious than moral freedom - ability to choose for oneself in making decisions? Or again, is not mutual interdependence and a social sense very important? Would it be preferable to run on rails and be mechanically programmed never to do wrong? Surely life without moral freedom or mutual responsibility would be infinitely the poorer, not deserving to be called personal. To be a person, and human, seems necessarily to be vulnerable and able to hurt others.

2) Life genuinely personal, yet always protected from the resulting hazards, would imply an 'invasive' Creator, constantly intervening to rescue someone from trouble or suspending the regular and consistent working of the Creator's structure. It would mean a string of miracles rather than the consistent working of a Creator from within his creation. Mark well, above all, that Christ himself - 'one' with the Creator, as we believe - prayed fervently to be delivered from agony, but the prayer was not granted. He was taunted by his enemies with his inability to come down from the cross, and himself felt deserted.

3) This seems to suggest a conclusion so astonishing, so demanding, that nobody has a right lightly to declare it, but which the event seems indeed to establish: what St Paul dares to express when he counsels 'Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil by good' (Rom. 12:21).

Does it not seem possible to believe that the human will is built into creation as a force in the structure of being, so that believing prayer and prayerful obedience actually does (to use the cliché) 'change things'? See also '*Some Thoughts about Prayer.*'

8. Christianity among World Religions.

There is much confusion about the status of Christianity. Exclusive 'fundamentalism' quotes texts: '.....no one comes to the Father except by me' (John 14:6); 'There is no salvation in anyone else at all, for there is no other name under heaven granted to men, by which we may receive salvation' (Acts 4:12). At the opposite end, extreme liberalism sees the Christian faith simply as one of the planets circling the central Sun: all ways lead to God.

Attention to facts, however, points to neither extreme. A strong case can be made for the belief that Jesus of Nazareth was, in a special sense, the fullest possible embodiment of God in a human individual. (For a more detailed statement, see '*The Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ*'). If this is true, then Christianity has the only revelation which offers what has been called 'the human face of God'. Without any diminution of the awe and supreme majesty of God - indeed, with their greatest possible enhancement - Jesus brings to

believers a unique revelation. It is the revelation of a God whose 'almighty' power is constituted, not by overruling force but by self-giving love and by a compassion which, enhancing rather than diminishing supreme moral demand and judgment, goes all the way in paying the absolute cost of reconciliation between humankind and God. Is not this a unique and compelling understanding of power, all too little regarded and reflected by the Christian Church itself?

Judaism, for its part, presents God as a God of forgiveness and redemption, yet does not run to the length of incarnation. Islam offers an austere world-ruler. All three faiths insist on the unity of God: despite contrary claims against Christianity, it is in reality as staunchly monotheistic as the others.

Some of the eastern religions avoid personal and monistic representations of God, refusing a sharp distinction between Creator and creation, and thinking rather of influences permeating everything and distributed through an indefinite number of forms. One thinks of Wordsworth's 'deeply interfused' pantheism.

Of 'paganisms', it might be true to say that the chief aim of a cult is to gain control over circumstances, using techniques for getting rather than giving. If this is a fair estimate, 'paganism' can reasonably be excluded from the present investigation.

Of the others, it must surely be said that all are in some measure valid understandings of the Divine. It would be false to suggest of any of them that it is not, in some degree, an authentic revelation of God, and does not lift humankind above itself and call for worship.

But - and this is a point sometimes overlooked - that is no reason for grouping them all as equally successful revelations of the Divine reality. While recognising them all as 'ways to God' and, in their degree, valid revelations, it is still not unreasonable to claim for one of them that it is the fullest, most comprehensive, most illuminating revelation. And that, in a word, is where the Christian faith stands. Rejecting the validity, in its degree, of none, it claims that the fullest and most comprehensive revelation is in Jesus Christ. Of all the planets circling the central Sun, Christianity is the brightest. More sophisticated statements have been proposed by Christian philosophers. If the one here presented is crude, let it be at least a stepping-stone to something better.

To claim that the Christian revelation is fuller than Judaism is in no way anti-Semitic. It was indeed precisely Semitic writers who themselves first put the Christian claim in writing. It is sadly true that St Paul spoke bitterly about Jews in 1 Thess. 2:15f., but, in the context, it is clear that these were only the particular Jews who attacked Christians and tried to stamp out their movement. About Israel as a whole, one only has to read Rom. 9-11 to see St Paul's passionate love and eager hopes for his own nation. Christians saw the Church as the natural crown and fulfilment of all that Israel stood for. The Old Covenant is indeed superseded, but only because it is transcendently fulfilled by the New (1 Cor. 3). If the Christian Church were faithful to its calling, the truth would be better understood.

9. The Bible and the Guidance of God.

The Bible is sometimes treated in a superstitious way as an oracle: open it and you will read the will of God! Indeed, it is often itself called 'the Word of God'. But that is a misnomer. In the passage in Ephesians 6 about the Christian warrior's armour, 'the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God' (verse 17) is almost certainly *not* the Bible. If it were, it could refer only to what Christians call 'the Old testament', for the New Testament did not then exist.

Rather, the weapon that delivers the winning stroke is simply obedience to the will of God, however found. The function of the Bible is not to speak God's will directly to us, but to bring us into touch with Jesus Christ, and to make us open to his guidance: he it is who, in his living presence, speaks the 'word' or utterance of God to us, if we are sensitive and thoughtful. It is Jesus Christ whom the New Testament calls the 'word' of God (e.g. in John 1 and 1 John 1); actually Ephesians 6:17 does not even use the standard word, *logos*, but *hrema*, 'utterance'. Patient study of the Jewish Bible, 'the Law, the Prophets and the Writings', which Christians often call 'the Old Testament', tells us of the People of God - their aspirations and ideals, their disobediences and failures. In the New Testament we meet Jesus of Nazareth and the New Covenant inaugurated by his fearless teaching, his persistent love for all in need, the terrible death to which it led him, and his rising again and palpable presence as King of that People of God. The way to God's will is through Jesus Christ, and it is he - the living will of God - to whom the Bible leads us. We need to study the Bible patiently and persistently and with disciplined care, both individually and collectively, both at the study table and in communal prayer and worship. So we may find and be found by Jesus Christ, the living 'Word' of God, and be given the moral courage to obey. Of course we know the freak stories of guidance direct from the written page - the wayward seeker in North Africa, overhearing the mantra of a child at play, which led him to pick up the book and read, or the defeated evangelist at Cambridge, held to his duty by the words that leapt off the page; but normally it is not that way. It is the unromantic, obedient slog, both alone and with fellow seekers, in disciplined prayer and study, that makes the command audible and the moral strength accessible. That is how the will of God is strenuously discerned. If one could read it off from the page, whatever one makes of the homosexual questions, one would have to start by stoning to death one's disobedient son....! (Deut. 21:18-21) Is *that* 'the word of God'? It is a dangerous mistake to imagine that the words of Scripture can speak with direct authority, outside the complex context of a community believing in Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit. We need to take into account reason and tradition as well as the Bible as a whole, and to be discriminately alert to all the channels by which the Holy Spirit may reach us. Elsewhere I have suggested that the Bible is not so much a compass or a chart as instructions for finding the Pilot.

10. Prayer.

The glory of the Christian faith is the Incarnation. Astoundingly, we are privileged to know the human face of God! But this carries with it the danger of 'anthropomorphism': we are tempted to conceive of God as a human Father - the 'Old Man in the sky' of the cartoonists. And this, in turn, may spoil our prayer.

'Prayer', in this context, is used in its strict sense of 'petition', 'request'. It is not the whole of worship, for there are other ingredients too, such as penitence, adoration, meditation. How, then, are we to conceive of our petitioning? Our conception of prayer may be all too like a vast family, besieging a harassed Parent with conflicting demands - a farmer praying for rain, while a Vicar wants fair weather for the Church fete. No wonder if we begin to think that answers to prayer are erratic, or that prayer just isn't answered even when it is so obviously in line with the divine will as prayer for the enlightenment of an unbeliever!

The New Testament does indeed picture God as a Parent, and insists that, as his children, we must persist in our requests and never give up. Does a father give his son a scorpion when he asks for an egg (Luke 11:12)? Indeed, will even a surly, godless judge refuse a widow her rights, if she pesters him for long enough (Luke 18:1-8)? Persevere in prayer, urges St Paul (1 Thess. 5:17, etc.).

Yet why, then, do prayers so often seem to be disregarded - only some spectacularly

answered, but others simply ignored? Perhaps two considerations may help.

First, we have to recognise that the family analogy - good as far as it goes - is too narrow. Perhaps we have to ask how the universe works - stupendous in its dimensions, incomprehensible in its complexity. Does it help, at least a little, if the human will turns out itself to be an ingredient in its working? What if our prayer is, in effect, an offering to God of our obedience, as an active force in the universe, that opens sluice-gates through which the power of God may stream? (Compare James 5:16-18.) What if prayer takes its place among other forces in the dynamics of the universe? A case has been made for this belief. It would make prayer of vital importance in God's mode of action, and yet with workings too complex and too far-reaching to be containable within simple analogies drawn from human experience, such as a mere 'yes' or 'no' in family life. It would lift our prayers to the honourable level of a link in the structure of God's designs. It would be the humble offering of a human will for his unimaginable purposes, with results far beyond our range of vision. Instead of expecting to get just what we want, we are offering our will-power for God to use in his mysterious and infinitely far-reaching design. It will not rob our prayers of confident expectation, but it will rebuke our narrow conceptions of their scope. Of course it is a shattering experience when a godly person prays earnestly, but the request is not granted. It feels like something no better than indeed receiving the scorpion instead of the egg. But it need by no means be a denial of the value of the prayer: genuine love of God, in the offering of obedience, can never be wasted.

But, secondly, there is an even deeper reality to be reckoned with. I have just used terms of power - 'active force', 'dynamics' - in describing God's purposes; but the deepest Christian truth of all is that Christ's way is the way of self-emptying (Phil. 2:5-11) - the way of what the world sees as weakness and failure. Christ took no account of achieving and winning, only of serving and giving and loving. It may be that sometimes our prayers are misconceived because, even at our best, we are still not fully accepting the way of the cross. As St Paul says (1 Cor. 1:18-25), the way of the cross looks foolish to the worldly-wise. It is difficult for even the best of us fully to take on board the extraordinary truth that, in a deep sense, weakness is the way of God's strength.

Yet, however far we may still be behind the way of God, it is still important that our requests should, at least sometimes, be specific. In order to make our prayer strong and realistic, it often needs to be precise. But if it is to be an offering of loving obedience, it must then be conditional. It must be marked by a 'D.V.' - 'if it be the will of God'. Our Lord's prayer in Gethsemane is the model: 'Father, let this bitter cup pass me by: yet, not my will but yours be done!' It must be specific, but wide open to God's better judgment. He will use it to fulfil his wise purposes, whether or not by granting our particular request.

Does all this rob prayer of its thrilling immediacy? It need not. Of course we long for our wish to be fulfilled; but too often it will fall short of the demands of self-giving love; and we can rest content, most of all, to know that God accepts the best we can offer, and will use it for the working out of his designs. Our prayer, granted or not in the shape in which we offer it, has helped to make the world go round. If we can believe that, perhaps we shall find strength to persevere.

11. The Sacraments.

The ethos of the Church of England is not, by and large, legalistic; but, with regard to the sacraments there are at least guidelines in the Thirty nine Articles, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Catechism, pointing to a position distinct, on the one hand, from Rome (or what is usually defined as Roman), and, on the other, from Presbyterianism and other

Reformation Churches.

In the first place, Anglicanism gives the name of sacrament only to Baptism and the Holy Communion or Eucharist, the two 'sacraments of the gospel' (i.e. those deemed to have been inaugurated in some sense by Christ himself), whereas the Church of Rome recognises seven, including, e.g., matrimony. But that is not much more than a matter of nomenclature.

More importantly, it is usual in the Anglican Church to repudiate the doctrine, usually attributed to Rome, of transubstantiation in the eucharistic elements (seeing the bread and wine in some sense as actually changed by consecration). Equally it repudiates mere 'memorialism' (seeing the ritual of the Eucharist as nothing more than a reminder of the original event), attributed to some of the Reformation Churches and often called Zwinglianism (after the reformer). According to Anglican belief, the rite not only recalls the Last Supper and all that it meant, but actually effects a spiritual change in the worshipper. A sacrament, accordingly, is sometimes called 'an *effective* sign'.

It is important to recognise that the sacrament is not the bread and wine. The sacrament is the *use* of them in an act of worship. Strictly speaking, therefore, there can be no such thing as a 'reserved sacrament'. What is reserved - if this practice does obtain - is simply bread and wine once used in a sacrament. The consecration does not, as it were, 'stick': the elements have not themselves been altered. The direction in the Book of Common Prayer to consume what is left over of the consecrated elements after worship is simply to secure reverence, and precisely to prevent their being used as objects of worship. (The water of Baptism, often 'blessed' or consecrated in current rites, is not 'reserved'.) Perhaps a valid principle along the same lines can be recognised in the difference between when a young man gives a rose to his lady love with a kiss and a declaration of love, and when, later, she simply keeps the rose and looks at it: in the first instance, a sacrament; in the second, a reminder.

It is common now in the Church of England to sanction the administration of the once consecrated elements by a lay person, as an alternative, especially at a sick-bed, for the Sacrament. No doubt this may be pastorally valuable as awaking precious memories and bringing home the presence of God; but though it may thus be a helpful rite, it cannot but encourage the superstitious idea that the elements themselves are somehow charged with holiness. This is precisely what Cranmer's rubrics in the 1662 Holy Communion are designed to eliminate. Deep down, what is involved is the avoidance of subtle and refined sorts of idolatry.

12. Solitary and Collective in the Christian Church.

Christianity, like the Israel of the Hebrew Bible, has an essentially social structure. It is not a private or solitary religion. It is true that there are Christian solitaries - hermits deliberately cultivating withdrawal from society; but they would insist that their withdrawal (in obedience to a 'call') is only to concentrate on prayer and meditation, and that they still depend on their spiritual link with the community, and belong in what St Paul called the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17, 12:12ff.). Every Christian is, as it were, a limb or organ of the collective body, which is Christ. All Christians, as such, are bonded together as parts of this great Body. It follows that - apart from those dedicated to physical withdrawal, but all the more linked on the spiritual level - all Christians have a duty to worship regularly with fellow-Christians, in addition to their private prayers. The Epistle to the Hebrews (10:25) urges its recipients not to neglect regular meeting for worship. Thus it is that, throughout the world, Christians know themselves as belonging to one another, with a duty to worship together, however different

or even alien their traditions and style of worship may be. Perhaps the only style of worship that should be protested against (as well, of course, as anything not truly Christian) is what is culpably inferior in language or music. Children may sometimes know no better; but it is all the more sinful to offer them anything but the best - not to mention the blasphemy against God!

In short, private and public worship are both essential ingredients in a normal Christian life, and Christians should be conscious of their obligations as belonging in the world-wide Body of Christ.

As a foot-note - it has recently become fashionable in certain Christian circles to speak of 'being Church'; but is not this a meaningless affectation? I may say 'I am a Christian' or 'I am Christian' or 'I belong to the Church'; but what can 'I am Church' possibly mean?

13. The Treatment of Offenders.

I am no expert in criminal law or prison management, though I have read some of the literature; but I believe that mere retribution ('tit for tat', quantitative justice) has no place in the motivation behind a Christian system of law or of the treatment of offenders. The deliberate application of suffering or loss to an offender may be justified if its purpose is to reform; but simply as an exercise in quantitative justice, as a 'squaring of accounts', it cannot, I believe, be justified or be of any constructive value to victim or offender. In other words, punishment as such, retribution, has no valid place in the handling of crime, even if severe treatment may be justified as reformatory.

Where an outrage has been committed, there is always a big proportion of the public which bays for the blood of the offender and cries for revenge; but this is disastrously wrong-headed. Self-protection, and protection of the vulnerable, are, of course, justified motives; but retaliation is a different matter.

In the Old Testament there is a great deal about punishment and retribution. In the New Testament, without the smallest concession to the condoning of sin, the appeal for retribution is substantially reduced. It is as though the centrifugal force of the Gospel of redemption from sin has spun it to the circumference.

But why should revenge be thus disparaged? Why should a lust for retribution be disallowed? In one of the few New Testament passages about revenge, it is explicitly attributed to God (Rom. 12:19, in a quotation from Deut. 32:35). It is the more remarkable that St Paul here explicitly forbids Christians to follow suit, bidding them, instead, to shame an enemy by generously helping him, and adding: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil by good'. A famous saying attributed to Jesus himself (Matt. 18:6) declares that it is better for a person to be drowned in the depths of the sea rather than that he should do harm to 'one of these little ones who believe in me'; but even that extreme severity does not advocate revenge, it highlights the wickedness of harming a 'little one'. So in Luke 10:12-14, the towns that rejected Christ's message will at the last judgment fare worse than the famously wicked cities of antiquity; but when the disciples want to invoke a curse on a hostile town, they are rebuked (Luke 9:54f.).

Even if a convicted offender may complain that the infliction of the sentence feels no different, however little retribution there may be in its intention, the principle remains, and, in the long run, the motive behind law and practice is bound to tell. Reform is a valid intention, as retribution and revenge are not.

As things are at present in English law and procedures, imprisonment notoriously tends to make offenders worse. Ideally, offenders should be helped to realise the harm they have done, and to begin to be concerned about their victims; and it seems that the systems of some other countries are more successful than the English system in bringing offender and victim face to face, and sometimes even effecting reconciliation. The option of community service may be a step in the right direction. Of course there are no facile answers; and of course it is a duty to the public to protect them as far as possible by restraining dangerous offenders; but it still matters a great deal whether the principles and motives behind legislation and practice are merely negative, or are positive and reformatory in intention.

Christians have a duty to do all in their power to promote these ends, and to support all the creative ministries of prison Chaplaincies.

Notoriously, the application of penalties can be only external, and does not necessarily lead to any inward reform of character: an offender may pay a fine without a trace of remorse, and a victim be compensated without forgiving. But the motive behind legislation and practice should be to bring the external and the internal together, so as not merely to repress evil but to encourage good, and to work towards reconciliation. This will be achieved not by facile talk, but by a radical change of mind.

14. Sunday.

To a devout Jew the observance of sabbath is important. The word essentially means cessation, stopping. After six days of creating the Creator stopped on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2f.); and in the version of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, the sabbath-commandment is associated with that : as God stopped, so must we. After six days' work, it is a religious duty both to cease from activity ourselves and to allow others, both human and animal, to do the same (vv. 10f.).

In secular academic parlance, 'sabbatical leave' usually means cessation of the obligatory duties every seven years, but, in this case, not for rest but for a particular bit of research or writing.

Jesus rose from the dead on the day after the sabbath, the first day of the week, which we call Sunday; and when Christianity found itself to be not just a peculiar Jewish sect, but a distinctive religion, no longer bound by Jewish rites but with new commitments of its own, it transferred the special day of the week from Saturday to Sunday. Immediately it could be a new day of special recollection, though it was not at first a 'sabbath', since it remained a working day - not least for slaves. If there was any collective worship, it would have to be before the working day began or after it was over. In Acts 20 we are given a glimpse of what may well have been late-night Sunday worship. They were gathered 'to break bread', which, in Jewish idiom at least, could mean simply 'for a meal'; but St Paul spoke at it, and it was quite likely a Eucharist with a sermon. The preacher 'went on a bit', and a weary lad sitting on the window-ledge drowsed off and fell to what might have been his death.

When a country had become broadly Christian, Sunday could be a public holiday, and, for Christians, a day of 'cessation' and of collective worship. Of course George Herbert was right to say 'Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee'; but that does not obviate the importance, still, of a special day. I was brought up in a rather strict, though gentle, Evangelical family, in which we were expected to give up our everyday occupations: no games, no 'secular' activities. Even reading had to be 'special', and drawing and painting had to be related to religion: you might decorate a biblical text but not just do a 'secular' picture! No doubt that is manifestly absurd; but I remain grateful for the idea, if only because it encourages me to make room regularly for meditation and for specialised religious reading, which might otherwise get postponed in favour of something more immediately appealing. I was also taught to go regularly to public worship, and I remain convinced of the value of making the whole of Sunday, if possible, worship-oriented. It is not the same to be a most faithful and regular worshipper on late Saturday night or early Sunday morning, but to forget about worship for the rest of the day, and to cram every remaining corner of Sunday with activity.

Besides, I am convinced that the cessation every seventh day from being busy, remains, in itself, a salutary habit. In the end, it tells on our reserves of energy and reduces our effectiveness if we have no regular times of quiet and contemplation.

For a practising Jew, observance of the sabbath is an identity-marker and a stringent obligation, rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. In addition to the injunction in the Ten Commandments, there is the terrible story of the man who was stoned to death for gathering sticks on the sabbath day (Num. 15:32-36); there is the story that the manna miraculously ceased every seventh day - some went to collect it, and found none (Ex. 16:27); and there are the tirades against sabbath-breakers in Jer. 17:19-21, and in Neh. 13:15-22. In addition to the Scriptures, Judaism has a huge rabbinical literature, interpreting and applying the Mosaic Law.

The Christian has no comparably authoritative Sunday-command; and Jesus himself, while

in the main observing the Law, let works of mercy override the sabbath-law (e.g. Luke 13:15f.), and appealed to the way in which the needs of domestic animals were habitually met on the sabbath - though we now know that the strict sectarians of Qumran disallowed even this. Incidentally, a remarkable saying, allegedly of Jesus, occurs in Luke 6 in just one (eccentric) manuscript: Jesus saw someone working on the sabbath, it says, and said to him: ' If you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not know, you are accursed and are breaking the law'. Thought- provoking!

At any rate, with all their freedom, Christians do well to ponder over the sabbath-law and to ask how best to transpose it, rather than merely ignoring the matter; and even without the religious concern for worship, regular 'cessation' remains important. The movement called 'Keep Sunday Special' deserves support when it champions unbelievers and believers alike who claim Sunday from their employers as an island of peace in the reverberations of workaday life.