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VERY REVEREND JOHN B. HARNEY, C.S.P.



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# IS ONE CHURCH AS GOOD AS ANOTHER?

*By*

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## Is One Church As Good As Another?

**M**ANY people are of the opinion that all religions are good; that all are useful; that there is room and need for all, and that all find equal favor in the sight of God.

The extent to which these views are held may be measured with rough accuracy by the wide acceptance of their natural and logically necessary consequences: the doctrinal differences between the churches are of trivial importance; it makes no difference what one believes; God does not care what religious opinions one holds, but only that one lead an honest, sober, clean and upright life. These and kindred assertions are the outspoken opinion of thousands, and the innermost belief of millions. In consequence, while they admit the necessity of religion, they hold that one may without blame or guilt, or serious consequences to one's self, choose any existing form of religion, or may even frame a new religion of one's own.

This theory that one religion or church is as good as another is well worth a careful examination. If it be sound and true, it should be spread abroad and driven home into the minds of men; if it be unreasonable and false, it should be unmasked and thrown aside. If true, it is a blessing; if false, it is a curse to all who hold it, and shape their religious course by its plain teaching.



**Logical Inferences Prove Theory Unsound**

Among the logical inferences from this principle are the following: vice is as good as virtue; idolatry is as good as right worship of the true God; falsehood is as good as truth. The statement that these conclusions follow from the theory that one religion is as good as another may seem very bold, and no doubt sounds harsh. For all that, it is correct. Nor is it so hard a saying as one might think at first. It is not charged that any one consciously puts vice and virtue, idolatry and true worship, falsehood and truth on the same level. On the contrary, it is taken for granted that no one is guilty of such folly; and the hope is cherished that the theory we are discussing will be decisively rejected, simply because it leads logically and inevitably to those conclusions.

One who really holds that all religions are equally good, places the various pagan religions on a par with Christianity. They are all forms of religion, and one religion, in his opinion, is just as good as any other. Now some of these religions teach polygamy; some permit and encourage concubinage; some have indecent acts among their sacred rites; some have slain children in sacrifice; some worship false gods; some foster superstition. When, therefore, a man says that a religion which teaches these practices is as good as one that condemns them, does he not thereby say that vice is as good as virtue, and idolatry as good as true worship?

That would be true, you say, if one meant that Mohammedanism and paganism are as good as Chris-



tianity. But, we do not mean that. We are Christians, and what we hold is that the various forms of the Christian religion are equally good.

How much does this limitation of the general principle mend matters? Let us see. Catholicism and Unitarianism, it will be generally admitted, are both Christian religions. According to the theory, one is as good as the other. Now, objectively considered, either Catholicism is idolatrous, or Unitarianism is blasphemous. The Catholic Church holds that Jesus Christ is true God as well as true man; that He is a Divine person; eternal, all-wise, all-powerful, all-good. She commands her children to adore Him. The Unitarian Church regards Christ as a mere man, and refuses Him divine worship. If Christ is not God, then the Catholic Church stands guilty of idolatry. She has forgotten, ignored, and insulted the true God by putting a creature in His place. If Christ is God, then Unitarianism is a blasphemy, for she has denied Him His rights, and has tried to drag Him down from His throne. Clearly, then, one who says that these two churches are equally good, implicitly asserts either that idolatry does no harm, or that blasphemy is a good and profitable thing.

Well then, some may say, let us modify the statement that one church is as good as another by restricting it to those churches which believe in the Divinity of Christ. No one can reasonably hesitate to admit that those churches are equally good.

Without stopping to dwell on Unitarian objections to their arbitrary exclusion from the benefits of the benevolent theory in question (objections that are quite

natural, and would be unanswerable if there were any soundness in the theory itself) let us go on to see if this new modification will save those who hold it from the painful necessity of concluding either that idolatry is as good as true worship, or that sacrilege and blasphemy are as good as reverence. It will not.

The Catholic Church teaches that the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, contains the body and blood, the soul and divinity of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is not bread, but the living Christ Himself under the outward appearance of bread. In presence of the Holy Eucharist, Catholics must bow their heads and bend their knees in adoration. To those who do not believe that Christ is really and truly present, this Catholic belief and practice, objectively considered, is simply idolatrous. They cannot look on it in any other light, for to them the Sacrament is but bread, and must not be adored.

Now this teaching of the Catholic Church is true or false. If true, then those who treat the Sacrament as bread are irreverent, profane and sacrilegious; if false, then Catholics must be branded as idolaters. That stigma must also be fixed on the Russian Orthodox, and kindred Slav churches with their more than a hundred million members, on probably twenty million Anglicans and Lutherans who devoutly believe that Christ is personally present in the Sacrament, and on the multitudes of Christians who held that belief and acted accordingly, before Protestantism came into being. If the Catholic doctrine be false, then those who say that the churches which teach it are as good as those that deny it, hold, whether they see the fact or



not, that idolatry is as pleasing to God, and as good for them, as pure and undefiled worship. If the Catholic doctrine be true, then those who hold that the churches which reject are as good as those that retain it, also hold, and cannot reasonably say otherwise, that irreverent, blasphemous and sacrilegious treatment of Christ is quite as good as reverence, devotion, and lowly adoration. This is the pass to which they are brought by the theory that one church is just as good as any other.

To avoid these consequences, which no clear-minded man can hold, the theory may be limited still further in its application, by those who do not yet see its falsity, or are unwilling to give it up. They may be ready to class those who firmly believe that the living Christ is present in the Holy Eucharist—Catholic, Russian, Slav, and Greek Schismatics, Anglicans and Lutherans—with the worshipers at pagan shrines, and the followers of Mohammed, as men whose religion is an abomination to God, and a curse to the human race. They may limit their principle to the several hundred Protestant religions which consider the Lord's Supper mere bread. For their sake, it is to be hoped that they are not willing to go to such lengths. Yet if they do go so far, they cannot keep their pet principle, and escape folly. For even then they will have to say that falsehood is as good as truth.

Of the many hundred Protestant churches, there are no two that agree exactly in teaching and practice. What one holds as true, others reject as false; what one reckons as holy, others condemn as insulting to God. Lutherans think infant baptism valid and right; Bap-

tists and others think it worthless and wrong. Presbyterians believe in hell, asserting the everlasting punishment of some souls, and maintaining that God is just Who inflicts such chastisement. Universalists believe that all will be saved. To multitudes the doctrine of hell is an insult to God, and an outrage on man. So runs the story all along the line. What one church teaches as true or good, other churches put away as false, or wicked.

Plain, common sense tells us that two contradictory statements cannot both be true at the same time. For example, if it be true that two and two make four, it cannot be true that they do not make four. In the same way, if it be true that infant baptism is valid, or that there is a hell where souls are punished forever, it cannot also be true that infant baptism is not valid, or that there is no hell with everlasting chastisement. Hence, since Protestant churches as a matter of fact do teach contradictory doctrines, it is evident that some teach falsehood. Well then, if we hold that these churches are all equally good, do we not thereby say implicitly that falsehood is as good as truth? What is that but folly? What is it but an insult to human intelligence, and an insult to God Who loves truth and hates a lie?

Since the theory that one religion is as good as another leads logically to the conclusions that vice is as good as virtue, and idolatry as good as pure worship, and since the modification of that theory which makes one Protestant church as good as another leads logically to the conclusion that falsehood is as good as truth, we must give up the theory root and branch.

### **The Argument from Sincerity**

No happy-go-lucky theory that it makes no difference in God's sight what a man believes, because there are good, sincere men in all the churches, can bring peace or rest to thoughtful minds. The truth about God and about our duties towards Him is not rendered trifling and unimportant by men's quarrels as to what those truths may be. Truth comes before men, and demands a hearing—in its own name, and by virtue of its inherent, inalienable, indestructible rights. It does not stand or fall by what men think about it, or the way in which they treat it. You or I may neglect the truth, question it, cast it aside, call it a lie. This man or that, who seems to be learned and wise, may reject it, laugh at it, hold it up to scorn. Truth does not die. It is imperishable, and eternal. It simply waits in calm majesty until death has snatched away those that were indifferent, or hostile to its claims; and when they are laid away in forgotten graves, it thrills the heart and wins the loving, grateful allegiance of other, wiser generations.

No doubt there are good, sincere men in all the churches. No doubt too, their sincerity will count for them before God, and will be a shield to save them from punishment for errors into which they have blamelessly fallen. Their sincerity, however, adds neither weight, nor strength, nor value to their errors. Neither does it lessen the obligation which rests on us to seek, and when we have found, to lay strong hold upon the truths that they have failed to find or to understand. The rights of truth are not so volatile as to vanish the

moment an honest man overlooks them. It is not right to treat truth and error alike. Though error be born in honesty and cherished in sincerity, it is error still. When recognized in its true colors and character, it must be condemned. Above all, it must be rejected.

Man has a mind made to know the truth; able to discern it, and restless until it is found. God, Who fashioned that mind, gave it strength and planted in it the desire of knowledge, does not look down with approval on the lazy indifference by which its strength is squandered, its fire quenched, and its purpose frustrated. He is quite as desirous of being honored by our intellect as by our other faculties. In one way He is even more anxious to be honored by this, the noblest of our powers, the one that raises us high above the brutes, and puts us at the very head of His visible creation, than by those powers that are plainly subordinate, and are but little different from what we meet in lower orders of being.

We do not say that God expects us to be equally successful in our search for truth; we do not say that He will be dissatisfied with one who has fallen into blameless error. No! He is not hard-hearted; He is not a tyrant. He knows our weaknesses, and makes due allowances for them; He understands our frailties, and mercifully forgives them. To say these things is not to say, nor is it to hint, that God does not care about our beliefs. He wants us to love the truth; He commands us to seek it earnestly, with open, honest minds; He lays it on us as an imperative, sacred obligation to believe, fully, sincerely, firmly, when at last the truth shines clearly in our souls, and calls on us for

our allegiance. With this readiness and candor God will be pleased; with less He will not be content; indifference He will not brook.

### **The Argument that Conduct, Not Creed, Counts**

It is vain to set over against these simple truths the importance of forming and cherishing high ideals of conduct; it is a missing of the point, and a waste of time to lay stress on the necessity of leading honest, sober, clean, kindly, upright lives.

It is neither wise nor right to try to shut one set of truths out of men's minds by undue insistence upon other truths. The absolute necessity of right living is unquestionable. It is a truth that we are far from wishing to hide, or to obscure it; it is one that we must earnestly keep in full view. But this truth does not invalidate, nor does it render trifling the other truth, that it is highly important, nay, absolutely necessary for men to strive after certainty in regard to their relations with Almighty God. These two are companion truths; they stand or fall together.

Man was not made to be a weathercock in the moral and spiritual world; to turn hither and thither as the ever shifting winds of impulse, prejudice or passion might choose to blow. No! The real man, the man who has come up to the full stature of manhood, shapes his life and uses his energies in accordance with his convictions. In him thought, reflection, knowledge precede action. He may not reflect as carefully as he should; he may become prematurely weary of weighing reasons for and against a proposed line of action,



but for all that, before his will begins to act, his mind has had its say. That is the tendency, the bent of his nature. He cannot frequently, nor for any great length of time, act otherwise. If he builds a house, he first draws up a plan; if he pleads a case in court, he first tries to find out the facts, and to think out a chain of reasoning; if he prescribes for a sick man, he first endeavors to discover the exact nature of the ailment and then to learn the proper remedy. This same law of action holds good in his moral life. To do what is good consciously, steadily, intelligently, a man must first have correct principles and correct convictions about the moral law. Men's beliefs ultimately shape their lives. There is a natural, close, and active connection between thought and work, between intellect and will, between convictions and conduct. One who thinks race-suicide right and reasonable, or looks on violence in industrial disputes as justifiable, or considers divorce the best way of settling domestic difficulties, when the occasion arises, will surely act differently from one who knows that race-suicide is a detestable thing, and that violence is against the meekness enjoined by Christ, and that divorce goes against the command that one should not put away his wife, and marry another.

It may, perhaps, be objected that most religious doctrines have no bearing on morality, and, therefore, may be set aside as of no pressing, practical importance.

This objection springs from the assumption that morality has to do simply and solely with the mutual relations of men; that it has no connection with the relations between men and God. This assumption can-



not be granted for a moment. It practically shuts **God** out of His own world, and tells Him that He has **no** rights which men are bound to respect. No one can put God out of his life, and still be a good, moral man. He may, indeed, deal fairly and justly with his fellow-men, but he has forgotten, or ignored, or determined to disregard the first and greatest Commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." That is a grave violation of our most sacred duties. We are more strictly bound to recognize and to satisfy God's claims upon our allegiance and service, than to acknowledge and to fulfill our duties to our fellow-men. God's rights are absolute; our neighbors' are relative. God's rights are direct and immediate; our neighbors' are indirect, and find their surest sanction in God's will. True morality has to do, therefore, not only with our treatment of our fellow-men, but also, and primarily, with our treatment of God. Hence all religious truths, when clearly set before us, have a bearing upon our conduct and character.

### **A Divine Revelation Requires Belief**

That God does care what we believe, and that the different churches with their conflicting principles and creeds, are not all equally good in His sight, follows from the fact that He has given a revelation to men. On this fundamental point, all Christian churches are as one. They hold and teach the fact of revelation, and the further fact that it is contained for the most part in our Sacred Scriptures.

Now, no man ever yet taught without wishing to

be believed—or without being either angered or hurt by utter, cynical, scornful indifference to his teaching. No man who has a proper self-respect likes to have his word questioned or put away as unworthy of serious attention. Do you think it is otherwise with God? Has He no care whether men believe Him or not? He has taught us many things about Himself—His nature, eternal existence, omnipotence, omniscience, truth, justice, mercy, love—about the world—its fleeting character, its vanity, its hatred of Himself, His doctrines and His followers—about our own souls—their destiny, immortality, freedom and responsibility. He has given us commandments and counsels; He has uttered threats and warnings; He has established a means of communicating His message to us men of today; He has provided institutions of mercy, and the food of life. He has told us these truths and offered us these gifts on purpose—that we may use them to shape our lives, and to win for ourselves eternal happiness. Do you think that He will remain unmoved while men try to pick flaws in what He said? That He will smile approval while they reject His Word as worthless, foolish or false? Not so! God Who can neither deceive nor be deceived, does not like to have His words questioned or His gifts trampled under foot. It does make a difference to Him what men believe, and it shall make an everlasting difference to men, for those who do not believe shall be condemned. The very fact of revelation, by itself alone, is an appeal and command to believe every word that He has spoken, whether by the lips of Prophets or by His Son, Jesus Christ.

**Christ Demands Belief in Himself and in His Teachings**

You know that He taught positive, definite, doctrines while He was on earth. He exacted belief, allowing many disciples to go away and walk no more with Him because they considered His words a hard saying, and demanding of those who wished to remain in His company an open acceptance of His words.

Nor was this all. During His public life He kept the Apostles with Him, and explained to them much that was spoken in parables to the multitude. Then, just before He left this world, He commissioned them to go forth and teach all nations, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever He had commanded. He gave them the assurance then, that those who believed and were baptized should be saved; while those who would not believe should be condemned. He told them that those who would not receive them, nor hear their words, would be treated more sternly and severely in the day of judgment than Sodom and Gomorrah. Who will say in the face of these words, recorded in Holy Writ, that Christ does not care what men believe? Is His command to believe a jest? Is His threat against unbelief a bit of humor?

A sorry jest, a ghastly joke it would have been were He not in deadly earnest when He sent His Apostles on that errand. For He was sending them, and well did He know it, upon an errand that led them to prison, to stripes, to persecution, and to death. Would He have laid that burden on His friends if it meant nothing to Him whether the message they preached in His

name were accepted or rejected, believed or disbelieved? To what folly, to what blasphemy, would one be led if one were to think that He does not care what men believe?

There remains but one conclusion. Since our Blessed Lord, in accordance with His promise, built a Church upon a rock, and made it "the pillar and ground of the truth"; since He built it so wisely and strongly that the gates of hell have not prevailed and never shall prevail against it, it would be ungrateful, reckless, fatal, to give our allegiance to any other, or to believe that any other is as pleasing to God, and as helpful to men. He is faithful and true; His promises have been kept; His Church still stands. We can find it if we will; for it is as a city seated on a mountain, and as a light set upon a stand. We must look for it, if we know not yet which church it is. For all other churches are built upon the sands of human wisdom and human strength. They will fall in the time of wind, and rain, and storm. This one alone will withstand the attacks of its enemies; and survive the weakness, the cowardice and the faithlessness of its own children. For the Holy Spirit of truth abides with it forever, and Christ Himself is with it all days even to the consummation of the world.



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