

THE RELEVANCE OF JESUS

REPRINT
(Price 25¢)

A sermon delivered by Dr. Ernest D. Pipes, Jr.
April 10, 1960, at the Unitarian Community Church
1260 Eighteenth Street, Santa Monica, CA

Man has thrown into the heavens two artificial planets and a half-dozen or more artificial moons. Besides shooting a lot of hardware into orbit in our solar system, we are capable of transporting ourselves around the surface of our planet at several times the speed of sound. Add to these facts our comprehension of and increasing ability to use the energy of the atom, plus the outreach of human knowledge and the increase of human power in countless areas--and you get some idea of how different our world is from that of only a few generations ago. And yet, during this coming week millions of people, Christian and non-Christian alike, will be recalling and honoring the life and teachings of one Jesus of Nazareth--a rabbi and teacher of ancient Judea and Galilee--a man who lived nearly 2,000 years ago.

If we are at all honest with ourselves we cannot fail to ask how relevant are this man and his teachings to us? To what extent and in what ways can he and his example speak meaningfully and relevantly to us? What must be lost, what can be gained in translating this man into the idiom of our age and era? What is the distance, ethically, theologically and religiously from ancient Galilee to 20th century America?

To approach some of these questions, let us do some candid and honest thinking about the historical Jesus as several centuries of biblical, historical and related research have revealed him to us. To the extent that we know them, what were the outlook and the presuppositions of this man--and how directly is it possible for him to speak to us? For example, and to begin with, it is widely accepted nowadays that the culture in which an individual lives influences and conditions him in many ways. The influence of the social and cultural environment is especially noticeable in the underlying attitudes of a person and in the presuppositions of his thought and discourse. If a person is truly a "child of his culture," a study of the prevailing attitudes and assumptions of that culture will very nearly describe his own outlook and modes of thinking. Since everyone is, to varying degrees, a product of his times, we may safely conclude this to be true in the instance of Jesus. There is considerable evidence to justify this conclusion. Therefore many of those unexpressed assumptions of Jesus which are suggested in the following pages will be seen to be those which are characteristic of his religious culture in general. They will be variations or modifications of the moral, pietistic, legal, doctrinal, ritual and other assumptions of his day. However, while an individual inherits many assumptions from his environment, he also is capable of fresh or at least differing insights and intuitions, derived from his particular experience with nature and with man. These also manifest themselves as the premises of teachings or sayings. So we must seek to point out some of these novel or differing assumptions of Jesus.

We should keep in mind also that a teacher's unexpressed or inarticulated assumptions are usually not consciously apparent or evident to him--or his audience. These are usually the "silent premises" which underlie a saying or teaching and which neither the teacher nor his hearers take the effort to make articulate and explicit. Moreover, we should realize that in seeking to uncover the presuppositions of Jesus we are working from "effects" back to "causes." This line of investigation can never give unimpeachable results. For, just as a given cause can produce many differing effects, so also it is true that an observable effect may have arisen from any one or combination of different causes. Therefore we can never be certain what assumption or combination of assumptions underlie a given saying of Jesus. We can only make our inference and produce evidence which seems to support it and make it probable.

We are on sure footing, however, in pointing out that Jesus was a Jew, born into a Jewish community and brought up within the framework of Jewish thought and institutions. We find no evidence in the gospels that Jesus rejected or even questioned the fundamental propositions of the Judaism of his day. He never questioned the existence of a personal God whose will was revealed in the Law of Moses and other books of scripture. He never doubted that it was the first duty of men to do the will of God, thus revealed. Besides theism, ethical monotheism, revealed religion and legalism, Jesus shared other premises and principles of the Jewish outlook. He held beliefs as to the ends of God in history, his purpose for his people and the world, the judgment after death and the lot of the righteous and the wicked which were very closely akin to the prevailing beliefs of his community. It is probably accurate to say that the large bulk of the assumptions of Jesus were precisely those of his contemporaries and of the tradition of which he was an example and a product.

The gospels give evidence that Jesus had a central interest in ethics. His recorded teachings deal, however, not so much with why people should be moral but rather with what moral duty involves. He was not an ethical theorist, but a practical moralist; philosophy was the genius of Greece, not of Israel. The largest part of his ethical teachings consist in laying down moral precepts, prohibitions, injunctions, etc. But we may ask what Jesus assumed to be the motives for moral conduct; what did he appeal to in his listeners in order to gain their acquiescence to his teachings? As we have noticed earlier, morals had a legal character in Judaism. As G.F. Moore points out, "Right and wrong were for them not defined by the reason and conscience of men, naive or reflective, nor by national custom or the consensus gentium, but by the revealed will of God...and their obligation lies not in the reason and conscience of men but in the authority of the sovereign Law-giver."¹ We may take this to be the view of Jesus, especially on the basis of such sayings as Matthew 5:17-20, "Think not I have come to abolish the law and the prophets...but to fulfill them....Not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished....whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven...." Apparently, however, Jesus realized that while adhering to the letter of the law, it was nevertheless necessary to apply a degree of personal judgment in order to fulfill the spirit of the law. It is clear that Jesus frequently assumed his hearers to have the capacity of a certain degree of judgment and moral insight. He felt himself to be dealing with people who were intellectually and morally competent; capable of recognizing and discovering moral truth for themselves. He seldom teaches as though he believed that all knowledge is imparted and that his hearers must be simply the recipients of instruction. Somewhat in variance with the legalism and authoritarianism of his religious tradition he urges, "And why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?" (Lk. 12:57) So the appeal Jesus makes is sometimes directed to the moral judgment and intuition of his hearers; and more than that, rests on the self evident and self validating content of the teaching--as well as the presumption of its derivation from the Law.

We may discern here at least three apparent presuppositions of Jesus. He presupposed the rightness and necessity of fulfilling the Law. On the other hand he assumed the moral and intellectual competence and validity of the insight and understanding of his hearers, a kind of moral intuitionism. And also he assumed in his teaching that people would respond first of all to their own best interests. He commended actions by their expected results--one's own advantage being the rule of action. The assumption here is that any sound morality must somehow take account of our own well being, in the long run at least, we well as the well being of others. The appeal to self interest is evident in a number of sayings of Jesus. "Give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven," "With what measure ye meet it shall be measured to you again," "If ye forgive, God will forgive you," etc. To suggest this, however, is not to infer that Jesus may not have put primary emphasis on the first half of these injunctions and added the second half, the reward, more or less as a matter of course. It seems likely that Jesus felt it to be self evident that people

should give to the poor, forgive others, be merciful, be poor in heart, be humble, etc., and that the rewards for so doing and so being were not to be understood as constituting the primary motive. The actions and attitudes which Jesus urged upon others carried their own intrinsic obligation--or at least it is probably that Jesus felt they did.

At the same time Jesus clearly believed in heavenly rewards. The premise of several of Jesus' teachings seems to be the prevailing Jewish belief in the Treasury of Merits. As Moore points out, Judaism had no hesitation about recognizing the merit of good works, or in exhorting men to acquire it and to accumulate a store of merit laid up for the hereafter. This seems to be the assumption of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount when he exhorts his hearers: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...; but lay up treasures in heaven..." i. e., with God. Jesus also seems to believe, it should be added, that what God prizes in men's good works is not so much the acts themselves but the religious motive from which they spring. The desirability of a pure, clean inner motive for observing the law or performing any moral or religious act is a repeated injunction of Jesus. Matthew 23: 25-28 is a typical example of this, "Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites...for you cleanse the outside of the cup...but inside it is full of extortion and rapacity." The inner or spiritual aspect of experience was significant in the thinking of Jesus and is central to many of his sayings--particularly in the parables, where Jesus frequently draws analogies between the observable phenomena of the world and the invisible inward and spiritual truths of religion.

It hardly need be pointed out that apocalypticism was a part of Jesus' thinking--and here again Jesus shares the prevailing Weltanschauung of his Jewish contemporaries. He came, we are told, with the same message as that of John the Baptist--"Repent ye, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." And probably because Jesus regarded the time as short, the kingdom of God near, his teaching took on a sense of urgency. It is this feeling of the shortness of time that gives rise to this special sense of urgency and, also, that injects into his message so much of the extremism and overstatement and radicalism we find there. While overstatement and exaggeration was, to be sure, a characteristic of the oriental world in which Jesus lived, this characteristic hardly seems sufficient to account for the extent and extremity of it in his message. The large place given to the renunciatory type of injunctions, to unconditional demands for self sacrifice, for unbounded forgiveness and love and generosity, the demand for the ruthless rooting out of all inward faults and even the abandonment of all worldly possessions--these and similar elements of the message of Jesus cumulatively tend to suggest the sense of urgency which Jesus appears to have presupposed. But to suggest that Jesus' apocalypticism put pressure behind what he was saying is not to imply that it wholly determined his message. The content of his message is drawn from various sources--the Old Testament, extra canonical Judaism, his own experience with nature and men, etc.--and, while it is clearly affected by his apocalypticism, the message cannot be said to be derived from that belief, or even dependent on it. The ethical teachings of Jesus are grounded elsewhere: in prudence, in self interest, in the need for accumulated merit, in the Law of Moses, in an intuited sense of obligation and rightness, etc.

The foregoing suggests that if Jesus was not teaching an interim ethic, he may nevertheless have been teaching a minority ethic. That is, there is evidence to support the conjecture that Jesus was working on the assumption that he was addressing a minority group in the society in which he lived--a persecuted, down-trodden, subjugated and disappointed people in an occupied country--and that his message was peculiarly tailored for such a people. I don't suggest that Jesus consciously regarded his people as subjugated and disappointed, perhaps recalling the Maccabean efforts, and that he purposely taught a circumscribed ethic intended for

a special group in a particular situation. He undoubtedly believed that the attitudes and behavior he prescribed were universally valid and invariably rewarding. Nevertheless, the teachings themselves seem to be specially adjusted and adapted to a conquered and occupied people--and I conjecture that Jesus unconsciously assumed his hearers to be in a minority position or status. For such a people renunciation, self sacrifice, unbounded forgiveness, rigid self discipline, a surplus of virtue, etc., would be the mark of prudence and wisdom. To turn the other cheek and to go the other mile is a good way to keep out of court and thereby minister to one's own best interests--if you are not in a power position. The point, then, is that certain elements at least of Jesus' teachings would seem to presuppose as the condition for their acceptance the fact of the minority position in society of the hearers. Or, stated otherwise, if the teachings are understood as self evident, they will be most acutely evident to a powerless and subject group which, moreover, has reconciled itself to living under the rule of power. Or, if self interest or even prudence is the motive appealed to in some of Jesus' teachings, then that appeal will be decidedly less compelling if it is directed toward those who are in a majority position and who control the posts of power in the social structure. Jesus didn't assume this kind of hearer; the message itself was not primarily directed to them but to those who had to live under them.²

The unexposed premise, then, of some of Jesus' teachings was surely apocalypticism, and to that extent it is possible to argue that there is an element of an interim ethic in his teaching. Also I have suggested that the presupposition of certain elements of his teaching may have been the fact of a minority status in his hearers and to that extent he teaches a minority ethic. But each of these presuppositions rests on yet another: the premise of the substantial cultural like-mindedness of his audience. Jesus could count on his audience being made up of people who were culturally similar; he could assume a high degree of homogeneity in his hearers--including similarity of accepted religious usage, vocabulary and belief and even a certain oneness of interests, desires, likes and hopes and prejudices. These conditions are prerequisite for an unparadoxical application of many of Jesus' teachings. An example is the Golden Rule--one of the great precepts derived from Jewish Law. When Jesus taught "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" he was repeating a precept that demanded as the condition of its practical application the existence of a culturally homogeneous community. This Jesus could and did presuppose. This point is made clear by the following amusing anecdote. Consider the savage chieftain who offered the Christian missionary a harem of the tribe's most seductive maidens. The chieftain did not understand the missionary's protest. Had he not been taught the Golden Rule by the missionary? Would he not himself expect this courtesy if he visited the missionary in the Christian homeland? The missionary could make his declination stick only by first getting overtly accepted what is the covert assumption of the rule, that he and the chieftain are not culturally like-minded. So cultural homogeneity is one of the presuppositions which lie behind some of Jesus' teaching and without which it cannot be directly applied.

Yet, one would miss altogether the key to the understanding of many of the sayings of Jesus if he did not take into account the veritable mystic intensity and glow of the teacher's religiosity. His religious experiences are the premises of much of his teaching. The quality and depth of these experiences make an impact on his thinking and behavior, moreover, which serve to condition the content of his teaching. We can say that the character and quality of Jesus' personal, mystical-religious experiences serve as the foundation upon which many of his assumptions about religion are based. As Montefiore has said regarding Jesus' teaching, "Perhaps it is a feeling as if all religion were concentrated and expressed in a certain condition of soul, which manifests itself in gentleness and pity and love and the patient endurance of wrong; in a certain peacefulness, which is also capable of utmost heroism and sacrifice, in a certain glow and enthusiasm, which produce a

peculiar and indomitable happiness." Such a feeling on the part of Jesus, and this is the kind of orientation which the mystical experience can produce, must have been the wellspring from which many of his teachings flowed. Given such a premise, is not the Sermon on the Mount much illuminated? Are not these and similar teachings best understood as the verbal and behavioral expressions of such a condition of soul?

So far we have had occasion to mention a number of probable assumptions of Jesus. Undoubtedly more than one premise was operative in any given saying of Jesus. Also it becomes clear that there are no necessary or logical connections among the assumptions of Jesus' thinking. The assumptions have a certain historical or cultural unity, to be sure, but no causal or logical interconnections. There is no evidence that they were ever integrated or systematized--or even examined. Nor were their fullest implications worked out.

What conclusions, if any, may we draw from our brief study? We have by no measure examined all the premises of Jesus' thought which are suggested by the gospel material. Jesus' remarks regarding the Jewish Sabbath, the Fatherhood of God, the state, prayer, fasting, sin, the afterlife, the Law, etc., could be made to yield the probable assumptions behind them. But these assumptions would be of the same fabric as those we have already sought to illumine. They would be essentially the assumptions which undergirded the Weltanschauung of Judaic-Semitic culture of the Eastern Mediterranean world at the time in question. But moderns seldom share or even comprehend these ancient presuppositions and modes and categories of thought. And given modern assumptions, the ancient conclusions very frequently do not follow. To moderns the content of the message, therefore, is in many instances either meaningless or, if meaningful, obsolete and outworn. On the other hand, many of the intuitions and insights, hopes and fears and aspirations which gave rise to the message of Jesus have a universal and timeless pertinence. It is the work of contemporary religion to cast these and other valid insights, principles and attitudes into contemporary expression and form--as well as to continue the quest for religious truth.

Here, I think, we find the best hint to our general question--what is the relevance of Jesus. He is relevant and meaningful only as we find it possible to translate him into terms which are relevant and meaningful. I use "translate" deliberately--for the ancient idiom is a foreign one--and not in every instance is there an equivalent translation. The assumptions, knowledge and world-view have changed so vastly that there is little intellectual rapport or meeting-of-the-mind until his ideas can be not only translated but socially re-located.

Lowell's lines come to mind: "New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth..." and this insight applies forcibly, I think, to the state of knowledge and science which forms both the backdrop to and something of the foundations of the Gospels. But if it is hard to translate the mind of Jesus, his heart and soul surely come through loud and clear; the relevance of the mental climate of the gospels is a struggle to make clear; the relevance of the moral climate there continues to be both real and urgent. To apply the moral ideals and ethical principles which animated the life of Jesus, and many other men and women before and since; to cause the warmth and fervor of their love and care to break upon the storms and anguish of our troubled lives and our troubled world--is indeed the work of contemporary religion. For to revere the faith of our fathers is not to believe as they believed, but to seek to do for our day what they so courageously sought to do for theirs.

FOOTNOTES:

1 Moore, G.F. Judaism. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944, vol. 11, pp. 79,82.

2 Will Durant has said, "Ultimately there are but three systems of ethics, three conceptions of the ideal character and the moral life. One is that of Buddha and Jesus, which stresses the gentle virtues, considers all men to be equally precious, resists evil only by returning good, identifies virtue with love, and inclines in politics to unlimited democracy. Another is the ethic of Machiavelli and Neitzche, which stresses the aggressive virtues, accepts the inequality of men, relishes the risks of combat and conquest and rule, identifies virtue with power, and exalts an hereditary aristocracy. A third, the ethic of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, denies the universal applicability of either the gentle or the aggressive virtues; considers that only the informed and mature mind can judge, according to diverse circumstance, when love should rule and when power; identifies virtue, therefore, with judgment and discernment; and advocates a varying mixture of aristocracy and democracy in government. It is the distinction of Spinoza that his ethic unconsciously reconciles these apparently hostile philosophies, weaves them into a harmonious unity, and gives us in consequence a system of morals which is the supreme achievement of modern thought."

Will Durant, The Story of Philosophy. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1926, p. 197.