

## **ALLIES AND RIVALS** by Dr. Charles A. Maxfield

The greatest rival of Christianity in the world today is not Mohammedanism, or Buddhism, or Hinduism, or Confucianism, but a world-wide secular way of life and interpretation of the nature of things.<sup>1</sup>

With these words American Quaker Rufus M. Jones began his presentation of “Secular Civilization and the Christian Task,” in a paper presented to the International Missionary Council, meeting at Jerusalem in 1928. In his conclusion Jones stated,

. . . we go as those who find in other religions which secularism attacks, as it attacks Christianity, witnesses of man’s need of God and allies in our quest of perfection.<sup>2</sup>

Provocative words! Can the great world religions be allies in confronting secularism? Is secularism still the great rival of Christianity - and all religions - today? What about fundamentalism?

The Jerusalem meeting of 1928 was the first major conference of Protestant mission leaders from around the world after World War I. The many papers presented at that conference pushed the missionary movement in new directions, not without controversy. Papers presented on other world religions lifted up their noble qualities, an attitude summarized in the conference’s closing Message:

We welcome every noble quality in non-Christian persons or systems as further proof that the Father who sent His son into the world, has nowhere left himself without a witness.<sup>3</sup>

In a list of other religions, and the noble qualities of each, it included,

The disinterested pursuit of truth and of human welfare which are often found in those who stand for secular civilization but do not accept Christ as their Lord and Savior.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Rufus M. Jones, “Secular Civilization and the Christian Faith,” in *The Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council*, 1:230-73 (New York: International Missionary Council, 1928), 230.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 273.

<sup>3</sup>International Missionary Council, “The World Mission of Christianity,; in *Addresses and Papers of John R. Mott*, 5:255-66 (New York: Association Press, 1946-47), 263.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

The conference encouraged an openness to truth found in other belief systems, without compromising in any way a belief in the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ. One paragraph of the Message (which sounds like it was written by a committee) combines elements of the traditional evangelical view with this new attitude:

We call on the followers of non-Christian religions to join us in the study of Jesus Christ as He stands before us in the Scriptures, His place in the life of the world, and His power to satisfy the human heart; *to hold fast to faith in the unseen and eternal in the face of the growing materialism of the world; to cooperate with us against all the evils of secularism; to respect freedom of conscience so that men may confess Christ without separation from home and friends; and to discern that all the good of which men have conceived is fulfilled and secured in Jesus Christ.*<sup>5</sup>

The italics are mine, indicating which items reflect Jones' paper.

Rufus Jones, a leader in the global Quaker movement, and an active participant in the ecumenical movement, had visited Asia in 1926. He was shocked by what he found in China. An aggressive atheism in the growing Communist movement combined with a growing skepticism in the universities. He perceived the religions of China, including Christianity, were ineffective in opposing this pressure. Jones wrote in his journal:

Most of the Chinese students expect science to answer all their problems. Where they are anti-religious it is usually because they identify religion and superstition and believe both to be incompatible with science. They have almost no conception of the deeper issues of life. . . . Science is for them the one way to truth and reality. . . . The missionaries have unfortunately too often presented a type of Christianity at sharp variance with modern science and when *that* is rejected, as it is by most students, there is no one to interpret the deeper and truer aspects of Christian faith.<sup>6</sup>

Jones was a self-styled mystic. The *deeper things of life* had to do with the individual's personal connection with the sacred. Scientific materialism was not bad; it was just superficial. Christianity - and other religions - addressed these *deeper things*

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 264.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Friend of Life: The Biography of Rufus M. Jones* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1958), 214.

Can Christianity and the other great religions be allies?

The attitude of Christianity to the other religions is one of the major theological issues today. However, this is a discussion *within* Christianity. It must take place. But what of our relations *with* other religions? Let's look at three possible aspects of these relationships:

1. First is *education*. We need to know about each other. We need to learn the values, the traditions, and the celebrations of each other. We need to move beyond knowing facts to knowing people. We need to learn what these religions mean when lived out in the lives of believers. As we build friendship we can become more candid in our conversations and learn even more.
2. Second is *cooperative action*. We can give food to the same food bank, join together in action against gun violence. We can march together, pray together, and work together for the better world we all seek. Secular persons may also join in these activities.
3. Third, we can do what Rufus Jones challenged us to do. We can join in a spiritual message that challenges the secular materialism so pervasive in our world. This we have not yet done. I invite discussion, exploration, and experimentation in this venture.

So is secularism still the major rival of organized religion today? What about fundamentalism?

Karen Armstrong, in *The Battle for God*, saw a family resemblance in the "fundamentalist" movements in all major religions. They are, "a reaction against the scientific and secular culture."<sup>7</sup> So the rise of fundamentalism can be seen as a consequence of the failure of the major religions to challenge secularism in a constructive way.

Depending on how it expresses itself, fundamentalism may need to be challenged politically or militarily. But this will be of no avail if it is not also challenged spiritually. The great world religions need to challenge their fundamentalist expressions

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<sup>7</sup>Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Random House, 2001), xii.

(1) with a positive proclamation that embraces all that is good in our world, rather than a fear based defensive reaction; (2) by a discriminating analyses of scientific secularism, affirming its blessings while pointing out its inadequacies; (3) and by always pushing people more deeply into their spiritual reality. While some of this challenge may be made by world religions together, each religion will be the most effective confronter of its religion's expression of fundamentalism. However, ultimately, the root cause of fundamentalism is scientific secularism, to which it is reacting, and this must be confronted by the world religions.

Questions:

Recognizing that western (Christian) civilization gave birth to secular materialism, is the Christian community too immersed in secularism to effectively challenge it?

Can we effectively challenge our rival "secular materialism" in ways that affirm the positive values of this rival culture?

Can we challenge this rival without resorting to violence or absolutism?

Can we do this together with people of other systems of faith?

What would this look like?