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INTO THE NEXT DECADE[1]

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IT is almost ninety years since Matthew Arnold wrote the sad lines of *Dover Beach*. Watching the far flash of light on the French coast and the still glimmer of the moon on the white English cliffs, the poet found an echo of his sombre mood in the grating of the pebbles on the beach, as the ebb tide sank in the Channel. It reminded him of the sea of faith which once, at the full, lay like an enfolding garment round the earth . . .

But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath of the night wind,
Down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world. . . .

And in the loss Arnold saw stark tragedy for man, 'confused alarms', and a prophetic vision of 'ignorant armies clashing in the night'.

Those who have known the evil of this troubled century, will concede the truth of the poet's insight. The wild fervours of perverted faiths, which have plagued these lamentable years, are the substitutes which starved nature finds when aspiration is denied the bread it needs. It is no accident that the apocalyptic sufferings of our day have followed hard on the decay of a vital faith in once Christian lands.

Arnold was typical of his age. His father, the great headmaster of Rugby, had been a convinced and active Christian. The son, caught in the wave of scepticism which engulfed the latter half of the nineteenth century, lost his faith, and the loss shadowed his life. A curious malaise of the mind was sweeping Europe, and Arnold was the victim of the epidemic. Beginning in Germany, where the odd requirements of the Ph. D. degree fostered its worst features, a psychopathic scepticism laid hold of the world of thought.

All tradition was called into question, and the movement infected all scholarship. Established belief melted before it, all authority was called in question, and with complete illogicality the oddest theories were accepted to replace tradition. Classical scholarship suffered equally with biblical. Homer disappeared with Moses. Troy vanished like Nineveh.

There is no need to retell the ironical story of the collapse of all this travesty of scholarship. I stood last month on the ruins of Troy and thought of Schliemann, the German grocer, who was simple enough in that age of confident doubt to believe an ancient document. The world of biblical archaeology has many Schliemanns, and stories as ironical of discredited scepticism and vindicated tradition. The defeat of hostile criticism has been spectacular, and the story might often be amusing, were it not for the tragedy of social and spiritual ruin which the nineteenth-century attack upon the Bible and the historic Christ left in its sorry train.

[1] The substance of the address given at the I.V.F. Annual Public Meeting, 25 September 1959.

We are far enough removed from those days of iconoclasm to analyse its causes. Perhaps the daily progress of invention, and the consequent rapid change in a land whose industrial eminence was unchallenged, inspired a contempt for yesterday, which linked yesterday's beliefs with yesterday's discomforts. A self-confident and forward-looking generation lost respect for the convictions of a less favoured past. Mr. Podsnap, in his way, was a figure as typical as Matthew Arnold. An age of multiplying and genuine discovery in many fields left no sphere of scholarship safe from those eager for change for the sake of change. And the illegitimate extensions of Darwin's biological theorizing to all imaginable fields bedevilled all interpretation of the past. How out of date and irritating the pontifical Herbert Spencer now seems.

Liberal theology, and the term is not a satisfactory one, grew out of this movement of scepticism. It was an attempt to accept a great disaster to religion, and to snatch from the ruin what good such desperation might snatch. Daunted by the arrogance of the sceptics, and unable to adopt the stand of Arnold's frank despair, timid theologians salvaged such rags of Christianity as they could. The result was an attenuated faith, without a compelling, indeed without a preachable, gospel; a religion speedily fruitful in empty churches, but a sub-form of Christianity, whose entrenchment in the colleges and theological schools extended its influence for half a century beyond the discrediting of the wrong assumptions which gave it birth. Its exponents, too, stole a march ever to be lamented. Those who, over the sombre years, held fast to orthodoxy, were slow to take up the challenge in the world of scholarship. They were preoccupied with preaching; and historic names demonstrate the power of the pulpit in the midst of this very age of scepticism. They were busy with missionary enterprise in a world which was opening under the British peace, and an immortal band of missionary heroes demonstrates the extent of that activity. And I trust I shall not be misunderstood if I add that there were views of eschatology which engendered impatience with that long-term strategy which might have held the theological schools, and extended the influence of the faithful few — Orr, Denney and the rest.

The tide has turned, for Arnold's poetic figure admits of an interpretation he would not have dared to imagine. The Channel tide flowed back, and it is flowing too in the sea of faith. Christian scholarship, in the truest sense of both words, is alive and active. Of the movement, the half century's history of the chair to which Professor F. F. Bruce has been elected, is symbolic. The necessity for a clear, thoughtful, and urgent evangelism has been grasped even by those who have not yet found their devious paths back to an acceptance of biblical authority. In the universities, ardent groups of young men and women hold, intelligently and effectively, a firm and vital faith. . . . And for much of this the Inter-Varsity Fellowship must have eternal credit.

We are far from the days when there was an element of desperation in the attitude of those who sought to hold fast to the great Christian verities in a hostile environment. It is perhaps as difficult socially to be a Christian in a modern university as ever it was. It is undoubtedly easier intellectually. I remember my own loneliness and conflict as a young Christian in the very university where half a dozen of the staff now belong to the I.V.F., and where every Thursday, in my own lecture room, I speak on Christian themes to over a hundred students. A notable victory is won. Sane Christian literature, in the language of the day, baulking none of the problems of the hour, and demonstrating with authority the truths we hold, is pouring from the press. There is much ground to win — in the pulpit, in the theological colleges, in the ranks of the university staffs — but the tide is flowing. . . .

Hence the need for thought, common sense, and courage, as well as for

strong faith. Nothing fails like success. The Pharisees were once a great, brave and dynamic people. They saved Judaism from enfolding paganism, and conferred immense blessing on the world. They lost their vision, developed the vices of the self-styled chosen, and became a name for pose, pride, hypocrisy, and the corruption of religion's self. You may remember Arthur's dying word in Tennyson:

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfills Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.

It is a wise word. Such is man that the hour of mounting success is not infrequently the hour of his downfall. In our activities for Christ in the world of learning, this is no hour for self-congratulation, but a time for re-affirmation of prime objectives, for self-searching, for a closing of the ranks, for humility, and common sense.

The hour demands much of us. A vast challenge lies beyond the rivers, where Barbary lay restive in New Testament times. It is an age, in which, as Yeats put it in that haunting poem, 'the good lack all conviction, and the bad are filled with passionate intensity'. It is an age of apocalyptic wickedness, ranged for the assault against the very citadels of the soul. The pressure of the pagan on the frontiers of remaining Christendom is something beyond the imagining of those who once faced the Goth, the Saxon, the Vandal and the Hun.

G. K. Chesterton expressed it well in the final scene of *The Ballad of the White Horse*. The Dane, at last, is down at Ethandune, and Alfred and his Wessex men lie in a patch of peace. But lest they should let their swords rust, and their spirits grow indolent with ease, Alfred speaks of other battles for the men of Christ. The spirit of prophecy falls on him, and he tells how the heathen shall return, no longer men with horned helms wading, sword in hand, through the Essex shallows, but in subtler guise:

They shall not come with warships,
They shall not waste with brands,
But books be all their eating,
And ink be on their hands . . . .
They shall come wild as monkish clerks
With many a scroll and pen;
And backward shall ye turn to gaze
Desiring one of Alfred's days,
When the heathen still were men.

But, says the king, they are easy enough to distinguish:

What though they come with scroll and pen,
And grave as a shaven clerk,
By this sign shall ye know them,
That they ruin and make dark;
By all men bound to Nothing,
Being slaves without a lord,
By one blind, idiot world obeyed,
Too blind to be abhorred.

Is that not precisely the grimmest of the perils which overhangs mankind, the conditioning of multitudes, brain-washed and docile, to accept servitude, and like it? The last citadel of the freedom for which man has suffered so much is in the Christian view of man and the infinite value of a human

soul for which Christ died. That is why the forces of evil hate so ardently the faith.

Yet, said Alfred, the eyes of faith will ever recognize the barbarian:

By thought a crawling ruin,
By life a leaping mire,
By a broken heart in the breast of the world,
And the end of the world's desire,
By God and man dishonoured,
By death and life made vain,
Know ye the old barbarian —
The barbarian come again.

How familiar he is, assailing from without, a fifth columnist within. Against him let us uplift the cross, not delicately poised in the subtle fingers of theological dilettantes, but strongly upheld by the firm arms of men who know their foes and know their God, and know, too, that God has redeemed them, and calls them to proclaim their redemption.

But this is rhetoric, when I set out to be practical. For what, in our Christian witness, in the spheres in which we are called to make our stand, does the hour call? It calls for clarity and relevance in our gospel. We must be modern without being modernistic, true to tradition without the vice of archaism. It is the common fault of compact groups to become introverted, to develop the vice of 'the Chosen People', and to become preoccupied with their past and ancestry. A jargon sometimes develops to express such preoccupation, and its main effect is to isolate a witness from the society it is meant to permeate and influence. We must speak the world's language, meet its difficulties, respect its thought-forms, and not lose ourselves in a world which non-Christians find strange and distasteful. As one who sees the I.V.F. from the angle of the Common Room, I beg you earnestly to do this. University men will listen to a university man who has won a place in the world of scholarship, and who finds a Christian faith in complete conformity with this modern outlook and academic honesty. They will regard vanished theologians, whose language we are sometimes prone to affect, as historical and irrelevant oddities.

With all this let us be bold, challenging and direct. Paul of Tarsus, that superbly educated heir to three cultures, is a case in point. I stood recently where he stood, under the Acropolis of Athens, to make his apologia in the intellectual capital of the world. The prospect was one of surpassing glory. The Parthenon stood above, superb in its Doric strength. Pheidias' statuary was undimmed in all its coloured magnificence. With a movement of his hand the apostle swept the Acropolis. It was a gesture of superb courage: 'Athenians', he said, 'I observe that you are an uncommonly religious folk . . . but God dwelleth not in temples made with hands . . . and we ought not to think that the godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art or man's device . . . .'

After this piece of audacity, Paul proceeded to demonstrate that he was quite familiar with the thought and reading of his Stoic audience, able and ready to seek and find those points of contact between his mind and theirs, respectful of their forms of expression, oration and argument, but withal uncompromising in the directness and downrightness with which he spoke of the essentials of his message, the risen Christ, sin, and judgment to come.

We could have no better model. Let us note the logic of his evangelism. I heard a minister once say that argument never won anyone to Christ. If Paul had accepted such nonsense the Epistle to the Romans, at any rate, would not have been written. It is our duty to give a reason for our faith, and let us not in perversity of theology or indolence of mind, neglect the

arduous task of study, lucid expression, and clear thinking involved.

To look further in the life of the great apostle is to find more than one similar challenge. We talk too lightly about getting back to the life of the early Church. It was, in fact, a time not unlike our own, full of tension, schism, and strife. It knew those whose activities called forth the Epistle to the Galatians, those who set out to bind the Church to a superseded past, and confine its benediction to an exclusive and a favoured group. It had its Nicolaitans, those who sought to resolve an agonizing antagonism by working out some compromise with paganism. Peter and Jude are eloquent about them, not to mention the Apocalypse. It had its Gnostic element whose activities first found an echo in John's First Epistle and his Gospel, those who whittled doctrine, made religion difficult for the simple, and the Church a clique and an exclusive society.

All of which is warning. Two perils the I.V.F., in this hour of challenge and stern testing, must avoid. Two corrosives can destroy the unity we need. We must avoid first the 'leader-cult'. Do you remember Paul, and what he wrote to Corinth? That cosmopolitan town had all the vices of pseudo-philosophy, and those vices had seeped into the church. 'What *are* you saying? . . . You are each making different claims. "I am one of Paul's men", says one; "I am of Apollos", says another, or "I am of Cephas", while someone else says, "I owe my faith to Christ alone."' I can almost hear the undergraduate speaking. 'Is there more than one Christ?' Paul asks, 'After all, who is Paul? Who Apollos?' A fervent faith in Christ should give us unity.

And let us beware of that other vice of lesser academic minds, the magnification of petty differences. Because I confess that I do not know the interpretation of certain verses in Revelation xx, and because I maintain that none of the commentators I have heard on the theme understand them either, someone the other day accused me of 'amillenarianism'. The word has no right to an existence. It is a hybrid of Latin and Greek, which would be understood neither in Rome or Athens, and it is certainly not English. I understand, however, that it is a sin, and, in the words of one informant, 'likely to divide the I.V.F.'. I do not, needless to say, believe such an allegation, but it illustrates the sort of petty difference which in the course of Church history has, on occasion, divided a church, and destroyed a witness. I hope we are too 'big' and too well-educated, for questions of this sort to come between us.

Let us lock our shields of faith, like the roof of armour the Romans called 'a tortoise'. The locked shields under which the attack could advance depended for their effectiveness on the loyalty and co-operation of every man. One weakling, one traitor could break the whole. Or if you prefer another illustration adapted to the seriousness of the task, remember what the same Paul wrote to the Roman colony of Philippi. Picturing the tension of the Roman chariot race, with the charioteer bound in the reins, and 'stretching forth' all strength and eagerness over his flying horses' backs, Paul said: 'I *do* concentrate on this: I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead, I go straight for the goal . . . .'

The goal is the winning of university men and women for Christ. Let us forget all else and dedicate our beings to it.