

The Permanency of Religion,

with special reference to the Future of Non-Conformity.

THE position in which the Christian Church finds herself shows no definite signs of improvement, though facile prophets of an early revival are eloquent enough. The Churches, someone has said, are now "like islands exposed to the waves of a non-Christian ocean threatening to wear away their defences and engulf them." The enemies of Christianity are busily predicting its speedy extinction. Their gloomy prognostications are natural enough in a time like ours, in which the world is in a state of intellectual, moral and political chaos. Equally natural is the cry wrung from many Christian hearts, "Why does God make things so difficult?" It is not surprising that the faith of many grows cold and that some even doubt the permanency of religion. The only radical cure for all such doubt is a deeper Christian experience. The experience of Christ in the heart always has an apologetic value far beyond that of any argument. Not that we stand bereft of argument, for we do not keep our religion and our culture in water-tight compartments.

It is too often forgotten that the permanency of religion stands or falls, not with the prosperity of the Church, but with the spiritual interpretation of the universe. The whole mysterious universe and the life of man demand for their explanation not only a religious interpretation but also the permanency of religion. In the long run, no interpretation of Nature or of life can ultimately satisfy the mind which is not a religious interpretation. History runs in cycles, and, from time to time, periods come round in which it is more than ordinarily difficult to accept the spiritual interpretation of life; and we, unfortunately, are living in such a period. But these secularistic periods do not last for ever. Already there are some signs that the present humanistic age, which began at the Renaissance, is drawing to a close. Such is the view of Berdyaev, who thinks that we are at the end of an age and that a reaction towards the spiritual understanding and interpretation of life is beginning.

Another consideration to be borne steadily in mind is that however dead Christianity may seem at times to be, it never stays dead. It has a habit of surprisingly coming to life again. In England, in the first half of the eighteenth century, Christianity

was in a far worse state than it is to-day. Bishop Butler, in 1747, three years before he went to Durham, was offered the archbishopric of Canterbury. He declined it, saying that it was "too late for him to try to support a falling Church." In a well-known passage he said, "It is come . . . to be taken for granted, by many persons, that Christianity is . . . now at length, discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it, as if in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment; and nothing remained, but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule . . . for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world." That was written in 1736, almost exactly two hundred years ago, and, but for its style, it might have come from last week's *New Statesman*. And yet, before Bishop Butler was in his grave, John Wesley had set on foot the greatest spiritual movement this country has known since the Reformation. One more example out of many may be quoted. Almost exactly a century ago, in 1832, Dr. Arnold said, "The Church, as it now stands, no human power can save." Four years later the Oxford Movement began, which breathed a new life into the Church of England, which Arnold and many others looked upon as being as good as dead. However much we may dislike certain features of the Oxford Movement, there is no denying the fact that it was as genuine a revival of religion as the Wesleyan Movement in the preceding century. It saved the Church of England when it had reached its *nadir*.

All Christians agree that the paramount need of the times is a mighty spiritual revival which will bring a simple and direct experience of personal religion back into the lives of multitudes. That such a revival will come is proved, I think, by the history of the Church. Religion has always been doubted and contradicted; it has often apparently been on the point of being overthrown, but it has always risen again strengthened and purified to resume its ancient sway over the hearts of men. If the anti-Christian philosophies of life, which have swept through several nations on the Continent, sweep over England, organised religion in this country will, for a time, be reduced to a desperate plight. The future looks dark—so dark that Canon Quick (no defeatist) thinks that it is quite possible that Europe may enter another Dark Age. If he is right, it will be some time before the Church emerges from the tunnel. But he may not be right. It is worth remembering that religion is often reborn in a catastrophic era. Some of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets appeared at a time when Israel had lost its national existence and was in exile. Christianity was born in the decay of Graeco-Roman culture. "The Protestant Reformation was roughly synchronous with the decay of

feudalism. Perhaps some such rebirth of Christian faith will come out of the catastrophic era in which we are living." (Reinhold Niebuhr: *Beyond Tragedy*, p. 113.) In this connection a German theologian has spoken a helpful word. He says that we who belong to the Church militant on earth cannot hope to see an *ecclesia triumphans* here on earth. The Church is never *triumphans*, but only *militans*, that is to say, *pressa*. An *ecclesia triumphans* would be the Kingdom of God and no longer *ecclesia*. (K. L. Schmidt in Oldham's *The Church and its Function in Society*, p. 26.)

But what of our own future? The permanency of religion by no means guarantees that all types of Christianity will survive. There are those who declare that in any event the ultra-Protestant and Dissenting type of Christianity is already moribund and is bound to disappear before long. Distasteful though it be, their arguments must be examined, for it is always wise to learn from the enemy. Moreover, if no touch of self-distrust and no whisper of self-criticism ever ruffles our complacency, we are, indeed, as good as dead. We turn, then, to consider the future prospects of Non-Conformity.

In the first place, it is pointed out that Non-Conformity belongs to a special type of Christianity—to what Troeltsch has conveniently, though awkwardly, called the sect-type in contrast to the Church-type of Christianity. He uses the term, in no depreciatory sense, to indicate that type of Christianity which thinks of the Church as a voluntary association of believers, all of whom have entered it by personal faith; which emphasises the moral demands of Christ and exercises a strict discipline on all its members, on whom it imposes standards sharply differentiated from those of the surrounding world. The sect-type of Christianity dislikes the hierarchical and sacramental conception of the Church; it stresses religious equality and brotherly love. It is a lay-type of Christianity, critical of official spiritual guides and theologians, and making its own appeal direct to the New Testament. It is also always independent of the State. In its worship it revolts from ordered and liturgic forms and prefers a worship which is free, spontaneous, enthusiastic and unstylised.

The argument of our opponents seems to be that in the modern world of regimentation the sect-type of Christianity has no chance, and its present condition shows that its decline has already begun. I confess that I am not greatly impressed by this argument and I judge that, in those who use it, the wish is father to the thought. If they had read Troeltsch more carefully, they would have found that he regards both types of Christianity as necessary and, indeed, complementary. He thinks

that the sect-type emphasises those very principles which the Church-type has been led to neglect. He goes further when he says: "There can, however, be no doubt about the actual fact: the sects, with their greater independence of the world, and their continual emphasis upon the original ideals of Christianity, often represent in a very distinct and characteristic way the essential, fundamental ideas of Christianity." (*The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, I.—p. 334.) In my judgment there will always be a need for the non-sacerdotal interpretation of Christianity of the sect-type. It is too deeply embedded in the New Testament and in Christian history for it to perish. It is not a passing phase.

Another and more impressive argument is used by those who predict that our particular type of Christianity has little chance of survival. They point out that Christianity has, from time to time, invaded and penetrated certain forms of civilisation and has thus become closely identified with them, with the result that when they collapsed, it collapsed with them. The Roman Church, for example, decayed with the decay of feudalism, and the Russian Orthodox Church collapsed with the collapse of Czarism. So, too, British Non-Conformity and its counterparts in America are declining with the decline of our Western industrial type of civilisation. Nothing can save them from destruction unless they emancipate themselves from the peculiar type of civilisation with which they have grown up. (Cf. W. M. Horton: *Realistic Theology*, pp. 147f.) They are so tied up with the Capitalistic order of society and with Liberalism, which is the political faith of Capitalism, that their doom is sealed. Non-Conformity is moribund because Capitalism and political Liberalism are moribund. It is the religion of the bourgeois, and the bourgeois have had their day.

It is difficult to deal with this argument, which is really a mixture of argument and prophecy, but the issue may be clarified if we proceed step by step.

First, let us notice that it is impossible to doubt that there has been a close connection between Capitalism and British Non-Conformity. Dissenters in this country were driven into business life when they were excluded from the opportunities and responsibilities of political life, and from the learned professions. It is also true that the Calvinistic ethic, drawn largely from the Old Testament, gave to Capitalism an ethical and intellectual backbone, and helped its vigorous development, though it never ceased to issue its warnings against the service of mammon. The Arminians lived in a Calvinistic environment and they accepted its sociological ethic, while they rejected its theology. We do not really need the elaborate researches of Max Weber and

Troeltsch to prove that this is true. All we need to do is to look at Dissenting life in the great industrial cities and at our own churches. The close connection between Non-Conformity and Capitalism may be taken, then, as proved, though association does not necessarily mean causation.

It is also true that Non-Conformity began to decline from the time that the Capitalistic system and political Liberalism were challenged. The evidence is before our eyes. The golden age of Non-Conformity came to an end when Queen Victoria died. The situation to-day in the industrial North contrasts very strangely with that of the sixties, as a quotation from Augustine Birrell's autobiography will show: "It is not too much to say," he writes, "that in those days my father, the Rev. Hugh Stowell Brown, Dr. Raffles, the Rev. James Kelly and Dr. Martineau . . . to name no other Dissenters, were better representatives of Christian culture and Christian zeal than any of the then Anglican clergy." (*Things Past Redress*, p. 38.)

Next, it should be noticed that this close connection between Non-Conformity and Capitalism has done us harm as well as good, though I am sure that the harm is often exaggerated. For instance, there are not a few who unhesitatingly assert that it has cost us the allegiance of the working classes. I agree that the working classes are now, as a whole, outside our churches, but, in my judgment, the most powerful reasons for their departure are the fact that there is now so much else to fill their leisure hours on Sundays and the further fact that they have been affected by the prevailing insensibility of our age to spiritual values. There are, of course, some who have left us because they felt the churches were ethically impotent to create a new social order. Those who were most outspoken in their criticism of the existing social order naturally broke away. They could not honestly see that what we were preaching and teaching had any recognisable relevance to the realities of their lives. It seemed to them that the freedom we so highly exalted often turned out, in practice, to be freedom for the rich and rugged individualist to express himself without restraint. In this mood they were easily captured by political and social programmes which promised them a Utopia of comfort and prosperity. The Labour Movement thus became, in J. H. Thomas's phrase, "the new religion which gives a chance to all." My own conclusion, then, is that our connection with Capitalism is not, as some allege, the principal reason why we have lost the working classes, though it has, without a doubt, cost us the allegiance of many.

It should also be remembered that Non-Conformity's close connection with Capitalism has helped to fasten upon it an ethic which is less than fully Christian. The Calvinistic ethic was an

admirable discipline to lift the commercial classes to a dominant position in a Capitalistic society, but it failed to guide many of them in their use of power once they had gained it. It enabled Puritanism to fight against the sins of the flesh, such as sloth, sex and gluttony, but it failed with the sins of the mind, such as avarice and ignorance. Its standards were high, but its range was limited. It laid great stress upon such virtues as uprightness, sobriety, honesty, diligence and thrift. These are all excellent virtues, and by inculcating them Dissent has rendered a tremendous service to the world. But they are the virtues most called for in commercial activity and which are highly advantageous in a competitive business world. They are "book-keeping virtues which show a balance on the credit side of the ledger." (Laski.) They are, however, not inclusive. The peculiarly Christian virtues of charity, mercy, brotherly love and compassion are not sufficiently stressed. In this traditional ethic, emphasis is laid upon a man's responsibility of stewardship for those worldly possessions with which God has seen fit to bless him. In practice, however, it has often meant the existence of paternalism and exploitation side by side, and the man of large charity has sometimes been only a successful exploiter. The result has been that we have been saddled with an Old Testament and sub-Christian ethic of reward, which has encouraged the fallacious notion that all material prosperity comes from God and that the inability "to get on" is due to the absence of grace. The successful business man was the chosen vessel of the Lord. For a long time now we have not been able to insist, as the early Baptists insisted, that the merit of a man's actions should be checked by their social consequences. The result has been that we have come to accept the autonomy of the existing economic order. Religion must not interfere with business.

This traditional ethic has also tended to give to the rich, upon whose generosity our lack of endowments has made us dependent, a position of undue importance in our councils. Our voluntary system makes us afraid of losing the support of the man of property. Hence the temptation for denominational officials to be subservient to the rich. They always tend to do what the heads of American and Canadian universities are inclined to do—to deprecate any teaching that is not Capitalistic in its implications on the ground that it is an unbecoming attack upon those whose generosity has brought the universities into existence. Every minister knows, too, that we have sometimes to "put up with" people who have nothing at all to make them important except their money. The Church, says Niebuhr, "easily becomes dependent upon those classes of society who can most easily support it." (*Beyond Tragedy*, p. 121.)

To sum up, then, so far: The conclusion reached is that Non-Conformity's close connection with Capitalism has been a mixed blessing, for it has introduced into its life a number of evils and has caused it to feel more keenly than the Church of England the effects of the anti-religious blizzard which has been blowing for some years. But the tap-root of all our present distresses is not our connection with Capitalism, but the breakdown of the Christian view of life and the world, and the fact that, whereas the Church of England during the last century has experienced a profound religious revival, Non-Conformity has not.

We turn now to examine the element of prophecy in the argument we are considering. It is that we are already in the twilight of the Capitalistic age and that Non-Conformity, owing to its close connection with Capitalism, is by some kind of inescapable historic necessity doomed to extinction with it. To this we reply that the connection between Non-Conformity and Capitalism, though real, is by no means so close that they must stand or fall together. Non-Conformity will survive whatever changes take place in the social structure, because it is rooted in the New Testament presentation of Christianity, and contains an abiding element at its core. We may even go further and say that if Capitalism were to be displaced by some form of Collectivism, the distinctive message of Non-Conformity would be needed just as much as under other social forms. The point is important and worthy of elaboration.

No one who belongs to the "sect-type" of Christianity ever imagines that we shall get the Kingdom of God out of any form of Collectivism. It is a false and even stupid millenarianism which believes that we shall obtain the Kingdom of God by the vote of the proletariat. Moreover, our distinctive message about the rights of each man to be a free and independent person will be needed every bit as much under Collectivism as ever it was. That is really what Non-Conformity stood for when its individualism was at its harshest and it allowed the business man to be ruthless in competition and stood for *laissez-faire* in economics. It was asserting something important, though it did it in a blundering way that had evil consequences. Now Collectivism, should it ever come to England, will fail to assign a proper dignity and value to human personality, though it is not likely to be as ruthless as the Collectivism of Russia and the Totalitarianism of Italy and Germany, for they show a total disregard of the sacredness of human personality, in defence of which I doubt if they can ever be sincere. Under Collectivism, then, the witness of the Free Churches to the rights of human personality will be needed because human brotherhood is possible

only when it has as its basis a certain conception of God and man. The Christian faith is the only champion of personality and the only guarantee that humanitarian ideals will be kept alive in the breasts of men; and it is the Free Churches rather than the State Churches which have been its most resolute champions.

It is, moreover, impossible to subscribe to the notion that the peculiar virtues which the inherited ethic of Non-Conformity has inculcated are wholly bad. It would be a sorry day for Collectivism in any form if it found no place for initiative, industry, thrift and foresight. Nor can I see how democratic equalitarianism is ever to work unless it recognises the necessity of powerful leadership. Just as the organisation of our denominational activities must leave room for a virile personal life, so also must any new economic order, or it will fail. For this reason Congregationalists and Baptists, just because the pendulum appears to be swinging towards Collectivism, could commit no worse blunder just now than that of allowing themselves to be stampeded into a form of organisation whose inevitable consequence would be a totalitarian Congregationalist or Baptist Union. It is chimerical to think that revival can come to them by intensifying overhead government by officials.

As regards our immediate future, there are three things we must do, while we are working and praying for a revival.

1. We must make it clear that we are not tied up with any form of economic structure. We must be able to convince men that we are sincere in our defence of the sacredness of human personality and are prepared to accept the sociological consequences of the Christian ethic. We must not hesitate to condemn as sinful much that we have hitherto flattered as success. We need the same courage as the Church of England. We need men like Frederick Denison Maurice, Charles Kingsley, Bishop Westcott, Bishop Gore and Canon Scott Holland, and like Dr. Garvie among the Congregationalists. We had such a man in Dr. Clifford, but he has left no successor.

I am not advocating that we should ally ourselves with any political party or programme, or that we should draw up a programme to revolutionise the existing order; but we must assert again and again those principles upon which alone the social order can be made truly Christian. It is not our business to make the world safe for any form of social and industrial structure, but to be obedient to the mind of Christ. Never before has the Christian ethic been confronted with so complicated a problem. The Christian solution has yet to be worked out; and no man can yet see what the new house will look like when it is built.

In this connection, George F. Macleod of Govan, in his *Speaking the Truth in Love*, speaks an illuminating word. After pointing out that our principles are clear enough, though their application must be "tentative and relative at every step," he goes on, "We need not wait till we have something cut and dried regarding the application of the Gospel to our social needs. What is all this affectation that we must see quite clearly before we begin to speak of these most complex things? . . . The people are not waiting till the Church has a cut-and-dried plan of what the Christian Social Order is to be. They know the difficulties as well as we do. . . . When they see us brave enough to be led of the Spirit of God—on the tiniest next step—they will know at once that we have, what they know already the Gospel has, the only solution of this world's ills." (pp. 107f.)

It will not, however, be easy to introduce this new emphasis into denominational life. So many of our influential people belong to the bourgeois type; and nothing is more difficult than to get a middle-class person to scrap or modify the creed and ideals of a lifetime. Moreover, many are completely unconscious of the extent to which their own interests and perspectives have insinuated themselves into their ideals. (Cf. Niebuhr: *Beyond Tragedy*, p. 34.)

We shall again hear repeated the old argument that Christianity cannot concern itself with economic reconstruction because the world's fundamental need is for the spiritual regeneration of the individual. That we subscribe to with all our hearts; but we demur at once when it is made to mean that Christianity must keep out of economics and politics. That is simply the way of suicide for Christianity. If religion must affect conduct, it is an outrageous insult to the Church to invite her to disinterest herself in politics and economics. If Christianity is true at all, then it is the truth about all life and not merely the truth about religion. As Brunner says, "An ethic which ignores economic problems has no right to call itself either a Christian or a scriptural ethic." (*The Divine Imperative*, p. 395.) And as Sir Charles Grant Robertson says, "If we keep politics out of religion, we shall soon discover that we have kept religion out of politics, and have built the City of Destruction instead of the City of God."

We need leaders who realise that we are standing at one of the major turning points of history, and that the foundations of human society are quivering. We need men who are prepared to capitalise their faith in God the Holy Spirit, believing that they will find God present and active in our world as they grapple with the human impossibilities of the campaign for a Christian social order.

2. We must learn to set a greater store upon a teaching ministry. There is far too much sob-stuff and baby talk in our pulpits. Some of our people like it, but it does not meet their needs, and some, at least, are tired of being merely exhorted, and are sick to death of "uplift." They are genuinely perplexed and no longer sure of themselves. They ask: "Where is the God of Justice?" and "How can we believe when things happen as they do?" They need to be established and fortified in their faith. Some even need assuring that mankind has still something to live for. They show an almost pathetic gratitude when a preacher deals with great themes and fundamental problems. False theologies and pagan philosophies of life abound, and we cannot drive them off the field by the simple device of having no theology at all. It is imperative that we have more teaching, for, as Dr. Wheeler Robinson has recently said: "Protestant Evangelicalism has always depended on the truths it proclaims rather than on the institutions it maintains."

Perhaps the most disturbing feature in the situation to-day is the loss of faith among our own people. War and the continuous threat of war are robbing many of them of their belief in the efficacy of prayer and in an over-ruling Providence. Some have uneasy suspicions that man is only a superior animal and one with the animals in his final fate. The vast amount of suffering and evil in the world to-day has caused the ancient problem of evil to raise its head once more. I am sure that we cannot understand the attitude of our age to religion unless we bear this factor in mind. The unspoken thought of many of our people is: "If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? And where be all His wondrous works which our fathers told us of . . . ? (Judges vi. 13). I am not surprised that some of them have haunting doubts and chilling fears about the permanency of religion. They are not experts in history and they do not know that the Christian Church has been through times like these before. A teaching ministry has always been necessary, but never more than to-day.

3. We must rise to a truer conception of worship than that which generally prevails among our people. Our ideas of worship are far too subjective. Our stress is all upon the worshippers' feelings, as though they were the most important thing in an act of worship. The result is that, if our people do not like the service, if they do not have what they call "a good time," they stay away. They insist on enjoying it. It is a perfectly horrid demand and utterly un-Christian. The primary reference in worship ought never to be to enjoyment or even to edification, but to adoration. Worship is actually, as well as etymologically, a declaration of God's "worthship." It is an

offering to God, acceptable to Him and incumbent on man—a corporate oblation of praise and prayer.

It is doubtful whether this idea ever enters the minds of the majority of our people. Their stress is centred so much on their own feelings that they are almost shocked when they are told that worship is a duty, whether they enjoy it or not. I am sometimes tempted to think that we are literally doomed unless we can work this change into their minds. We are perishing because so few of them have any sense of worship as adoration, and of the creatureliness of man in the presence of the Divine Majesty. Their very behaviour in church is proof that I do not exaggerate. Clearly they have no sense of awe, no feeling for the numinous, no appreciation of the divine transcendence. No wonder God seems unreal to them when, at the very time they come together for worship, their emphasis is all on their own feelings. We need a thoroughgoing change in our ideas of worship which will shift the emphasis from the subjective to the objective, and make God central rather than our own feelings and likes and dislikes. Such a change of emphasis (could we bring it about) would make God more central and, therefore, more real.

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WILLIAM DOWARS was called to the pastorate of Little Alie Street in 1757, following John Gill (jnr.). There were then 135 members; when he died in 1795 there were four. Deacon Curtis Fleming preached his funeral sermon on July 12th, when two hyper-Calvinistic hymns were sung. Richard Hutchins of Greenwich made an oration at Bunhill Fields, where an illegible tombstone marks the grave. Little Alie Street was closed for three years, till Hutchins and Booth settled William Shenston from Eagle Street, who by 1830 had gathered 300 members. The addresses at Dowar's death were published by Button in a pamphlet of viii. and 34 pages, to be seen at the Museum and at Dr. Williams's Library, 35-795. That Library also has a copy of his sermon, *The Glories of the Gospel Exemplified*, 29-792.