

The Message of John Oman.

THE posthumous publication of *Honest Religion*, Dr. John Oman's last book, suggests a suitable occasion for attempting an account of that distinguished religious thinker's signal contribution to Theology. Oman achieved, in his lifetime, a foremost place among British theologians, and exerted a deep and far-reaching influence on contemporary religious life and thought. Though it may be safely said that his influence will be slow to abate, the time has not yet come for determining his final place in modern theological thought. No judgment at present can be other than provisional, and we shall do well to confine ourselves to considering his essential message.

It is peculiarly appropriate to speak of Oman's message, for his writing was deeply permeated by the prophetic spirit. Though his scholarship and learning were of first-rate quality, his work was never purely academic. He had a lively interest in the human scene, and even in his most specialised studies he never forgot life's common problems. Thus *Grace and Personality*, though generally judged to be far from easy reading, found warm acceptance with general readers. And his most philosophic work, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, is pervaded throughout by a homiletical flavour remarkable in a book of that type. His wise and penetrating *obiter dicta* on men and things are not the least rewarding part of his writing. One of the marks of Oman's distinction was that he could deal with theology in this way without falling into the obvious pitfalls that lie in the path of the attempt to combine the treatise and the homily. But in Oman it bears impressive witness to his conviction that no theology can justify itself that does not serve the highest interests of ordinary living. If the test of a theology is its power to widen vision and aspiration and to elucidate life's deepest meaning in the light of the Gospel, Oman spared no pains to pass it. He was much more than the strictly scientific theologian, and employed the great resources of his knowledge and insight to edify the Church and to commend the supreme importance of religion to all who would take the trouble to reason together with him. In this high sense he was a man with a message, and must be regarded as in the true apostolic succession.

There can be no doubt that Oman's place in theology will be determined by his two books, *Grace and Personality* (first published in 1917), and *The Natural and the Supernatural* (1931), although none of his writings should be overlooked by those who wish to take full measure of his teaching. Competent opinion is divided as to which of these works will prove to be

his *magnum opus*. Both have high claims in their respective fields, but time will probably show that *Grace and Personality* is the more creative. To know it is really to know what is most original in Oman's thinking. It is the key to all he wrote, and best sets forth that characteristic standpoint which gives unity to his various books. The other book, which is more academic, is closely related to it, as it deals with the philosophic basis of Oman's interpretation of religion. For our present purpose it will suffice to confine our attention to *Grace and Personality*.

It is significant that this book was written during the last war, and that its aim was to fortify faith in face of calamity and catastrophe. Fundamental questions were being raised, which "forced upon me," the author wrote in the original preface, "the reconsideration of my whole religious position." The outcome was not the adoption of a new standpoint, but the re-affirmation, with new emphasis, of the position already taken. Oman saw that the fundamental issue concerned the doctrine of grace, but the book is much more than a treatise on a single aspect of Christian Theology. In keeping with his principle that Theology is a whole, whose parts it is dangerous to treat in isolation (cf. *Honest Religion*, p. 155), the book sets forth a complete theology which touches on every basic Christian doctrine. From another point of view it may be regarded as a theodicy, for it seeks to justify the ways of God to men in face of the dark mystery of life's manifold evil and suffering. Nor would it be out of place to count it a book of devotion, for it possesses a singular power of bracing the soul to high aspiration and noble endeavour in the service of the highest. It is not surprising that Dr. Tennant has described it as "one of the major treasures of theological literature." It offers an instructive example of how a theological book ought to be written. Theology should not be a mere academic exercise of the intellect, but religious thinking undertaken by a religious person who is seeking to face the fulness of reality religiously, and to live the religious life strenuously and sincerely.

The fundamental question to which *Grace and Personality* addresses itself is the nature of the relationship between God and man. This, Oman maintains, has been misconceived within Christianity even as outside it. What it ought to be is defined as "a gracious personal relation." This is what is meant in the teaching of Jesus that God is our Heavenly Father. The relation is gracious because religiously, as in all else, man is utterly dependent on God, and needs His succour in the whole range of his varied experience. But it is also personal, because man is a moral personality and must be so dealt with that his utter moral independence is always respected. Without grace man is

a moral failure, yet he cannot achieve moral success apart from his own seeing and choosing. The essence of the Gospel, therefore, is the good news that God deals with men as His children, sparing nothing that grace can provide, yet doing nothing that would over-ride their independence as moral personalities. Truth must not be accepted on authority even though it be God's, nor must deeds be done on authority even though at God's command. Grace is not compulsion, which is always impersonal power even though personally operated, but is God offering Himself by the manifestation of the truth and by the constraint of love. This, Oman claims, is the New Testament conception of grace, which must be the foundation of any truly Christian theology, for no theology can be true, which is wrong about grace.

Our traditional theologies, however, have never accepted this conception of grace as their foundation. They divide themselves into those that make grace omnipotent power directed by omniscience and those that exalt man's self-sufficiency by reducing the necessity of grace to the minimum. Augustinianism and Pelagianism furnish the classical types. The former was right in ascribing all things to God, but wrong in setting forth grace as His irresistible power. The latter, in endeavouring to make room for man's moral independence, made the mistake of practically deeming all things possible to him, and so was led to make grace little more than Divine illumination. If the one undermined man's moral independence, the other undermined his religious dependence. Oman points out that though the Church remained Augustinian in doctrine, in spite of the Pelagian controversy, in practice it adopted a compromise. Within the Church grace was held to operate as irresistible might, whose manifestation was infallible beliefs and mechanically effective means of grace. But though the faithful were thus kept in leading strings within the Church, outside it they were allowed a measure of freedom. This meant, as Oman puts it, that while the Church was Augustinian, its members were Pelagian. The Church thus safeguarded its authority and preserved its members from the dangers of unlimited freedom. And average human nature did not object to having its thinking done for it so long as in the sphere of common life the reins were not too tightly held. It was able to cherish the illusion of freedom with none of the responsibility that freedom, in the true sense, carries with it. But such a solution, being a compromise, could be no more than a temporary adjustment of rival claims. The time was bound to come, and did at last come, when men could no longer endure the bonds of pupilage. Growing up, they demanded the freedom of their manhood, and the crisis came, Oman maintains, not at the Reformation, but at the *Aufklärung*. The former,

with all its significant achievements, failed to get to the root of the matter. It did not effect a real emancipation of the human spirit, for in casting off ecclesiastical bondage, it adopted the fetters of Biblical infallibility. The debate between Calvinism and Arminianism turned partly on the question of grace and freedom, but the discussion did not go deep enough. It was left to the *Aufklärung* to raise the naked issue by confronting authoritarianism with rationalism.

The *Aufklärung* is thus the watershed of the modern period. Oman describes it as the discovery of the individual, and from it has flowed that vast and many-sided movement which is often vaguely summed up as Liberalism. The underlying issue is the question of freedom, which was raised in so thorough-going a fashion that it is no longer possible either to suppress the problems raised or honestly to evade them. The movement was of supreme importance to the Church. What was demanded, in short, was a new conception of the meaning of grace, a conception at once broader and deeper. The fresh insight into the nature and significance of moral personality required a radical reconstruction of the doctrine of grace and freedom, such as would bring together, without reduction on either side, man's utter dependence on God and his utter moral independence. Such a harmony may be beyond our powers in the way of exact scientific expression, but no doctrine will any longer serve that fails adequately to recognise both these aspects. Freedom is nothing less than a gracious gift of God, and to seek to over-ride it in the supposed interests of grace involves an intolerable contradiction. The supreme religious requirement remains submission and surrender to God, but man may not yield himself even to his Maker except on the ground of his own insight and personal choice. Yet there is no exercise of freedom apart from grace, nor can freedom's responsibilities and obligations be discharged without the Divine succour. Unless God bless him, man cannot enter into his inheritance. Thus grace and freedom must be regarded as interacting elements in the fellowship which God offers His children through Jesus Christ. All this may well seem to some minds nothing short of a deplorable surrender to human pride. But to Oman's mind it is simply a return to the gospel. Consult the life and teaching of Jesus, consult the writings of those who first interpreted Him, and you will find no other doctrine of grace. "Our Father" means that God deals with us as His children. This implies "a gracious personal relation," in which both adjectives must be given their full value.

How, then, are we to explain the persistent distortions of the truth? There can be no other explanation than the sense that the consequences of unmeasured freedom are apt to involve

too much peril. In practice men may be better than their creed, but in theory they hesitate to be as adventurous. What tragedy, they reflect, may follow in the wake of letting man go his own way with naught to hold him save your appeal to the highest in him! Are not all the devastating evils of the human story due to this dangerous principle of freedom? Grant it free exercise, do you not open the door to sheer chaos? So many have thought and so many still think. Much strenuous labour, even now, is devoted to building up afresh the old safeguards. Terror of liberalism was not the least of the reasons that persuaded John Henry Newman to enter the Roman Church, even as it explains, on the part of many Protestants, whole-hearted acceptance of Fundamentalism. And does it not go far to explain the rise of the modern revolt against democracy and the development of our contemporary totalitarianisms? The way of freedom, it is felt, is too hazardous; it leads to consequences that will not bear contemplation. Are not the bulk of mankind but children in another sense than that of the Gospel? Surely the only sensible policy is to ensure their good behaviour by exercising over them the schoolmaster's discipline.

It is not the least of Oman's merits that he faces the alarming consequences of his doctrine as candidly as any far-seeing authoritarian. But he steadily maintains that his doctrine is grounded in the very nature of things, as any one may see who seeks to interpret honestly all life and experience. If it is God's way to work by irresistible grace, why is there no evidence of it in history? We ought to see a well-ordered pattern of events, in which nothing is, nor can be, out of place, whereas what we actually see is a spectacle of every kind of imperfection. Either God's providential ordering is within a framework of freedom or there is no order at all. It is futile, therefore, to attempt to work against the principle of freedom, for it is to strive to work against God. Moreover, it is to distrust God's wisdom and to doubt the sufficiency of His succouring grace. Did not God know what He was about when He made man as he is, and did He not know the consequences of His doing? To attempt to force life into other channels than those divinely ordained is to judge oneself wiser than God, and to assume that He cannot safely be entrusted with the guidance of His own world. God speaks through life and experience, pointing to the lesson that true living calls for moral adventure and involves taking all risks and hazards. Such a vocation requires childlike trust in the sufficiency of the Divine grace. We must see the world as God's world, and live in it as the children of the Heavenly Father, accepting life's stern discipline as the discipline which His love appoints for us. All is of His grace, and we must believe that

in following the highest we know, whatever the cost, we shall be abundantly blessed and sustained. We cannot tell all that lies before us, nor how long our journey will be, yet we may be assured that we shall not falter nor fail if we believe that to them that love God all things work together for good. Without the sense that there is a gracious purpose of good manifesting itself in all things, freedom would indeed be dangerous folly. It is grace that provides this assurance of succour. If we are to be confident that the way of freedom leads to the Promised Land, we must believe that underneath us always are the Everlasting Arms.

This doctrine, Oman maintains, merely interprets aright the whole course of prophetic religion through its long development till it found its consummation in the life and work of Jesus Christ. The authority of the Bible rests in the fact that it gives meaning to experience, the truth of which we can test for ourselves by living the life of faith. Hence the traditional doctrines are not only unscriptural, they are also contrary to the plain facts of life. The Bible is thus never out of date, but remains our best guide to right living. By its light Oman found the answer to the acute religious problems raised by the last war. He saw that the problems had always been with us, but it was not until that great catastrophe overtook us that the pressure of them was fully felt. Obviously no such calamity could have taken place if God's working is by way of grace interpreted as irresistible might. Such evil plainly could not flourish to bring disaster and sorrow to the children of men if it is God's plan to direct our steps unerringly in the paths of righteousness. The only answer to the problem, therefore, is that which lies open in the Bible when its message is rightly interpreted. Grace works within the framework of freedom, and its function is to appeal and persuade, to succour and sustain, whilst in freedom man faces the high adventure of life in obedience to his highest insight and judgment of right. The practical bearing of this relation of grace and freedom has never been summed up better than in the Apostolic exhortation: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to work, according to His good pleasure."

The message of the Bible may then be set forth as the word of reconciliation. Being reconciled to God means being reconciled to God's purpose for us, which is that we should live according to His will by His grace in the order of freedom. We must not shrink from life's hazards and distresses, for they are by the Father's permission; nor must we seek to evade its claims and responsibilities, for they are the Father's appointed discipline. Though we may seldom be able to discern it clearly, we must

believe that we have been set within the present order according to God's gracious purpose of good for our own profit and for the Divine ends. Being reconciled to God, therefore, is being reconciled to life, with which we are called to do our best, shirking no claim it makes upon us and evading no responsibility it imposes upon us. Because the order of grace is also the order of freedom it must needs be that offences come. There cannot be but folly and failure, sin and sorrow. But since all is within the Providence of God there cannot but be victory over even the worst if we rely upon God's sufficient grace. Rightly exercising our freedom and rightly using the world and its opportunities, we shall not only make our souls, but share also in the realisation of that Divine purpose for which God created all things. What the ultimate goal may be we can only dimly discern, but those who are reconciled to God know that they have light and strength enough for each step of the way. Only beyond, in the blessed life, shall we know even as we are known.

Of the company of heroic souls who have discerned that grace and freedom are but aspects of the same order, and have lived in accordance with that insight, Jesus Christ stands in a place apart. He is much more than the supreme example of how life should be lived in freedom yet in utter dependence on the Heavenly Father. He is the Mediator of Divine grace in a unique sense. The grace that pardons and reconciles and succours was made manifest in Him as in no other. In Him is revealed for all time what God has done, and is doing, and will do, for the children of men. The victory that overcometh the world shines forth supremely from His life and death and resurrection. How Oman works all this out we cannot now stay even to summarise. It must suffice to say that the foundation of it all is the conviction that no one cometh unto the Father save by the Son.

This broad outline of Oman's message will perhaps serve to show how great is the debt that many feel they owe to this great prophetic thinker. That debt is not to be measured merely by the intellectual stimulus he has given to those who have studied his contributions to Theology. The final test of the worth of a prophetic ministry is the results in the lives of those who have profited by it. It is Oman's distinction that he has enabled those who have come under his influence to live the Christian life more strenuously and more courageously. In an age distracted by doubt and perplexity and fear he has encouraged believing men and women of all grades, and not least his brethren in the ministry, to persevere in all high tasks with faith and hope. And his bracing message will continue to be fruitful, for it was Oman's way not to be content to speak to immediate and par-

ticular situations, but to deal with the fundamentals that are involved in all situations. He passed from us before the present catastrophe overtook us, but the book, whose occasion was the last war, is as relevant at the present time as it was then. When the highest prerogatives of the human soul are once more imperilled, we need to hear his clarion call to hold sacred the rights of human personality. Yet to respond to that call we need such a conception of Reality as will enable us to gird up our loins for the high adventure of living in the assurance that to follow the highest we know is no illusion but the pathway to a good that surpasses all our dreams. We need no less, therefore, Oman's other call to find our succour in the sufficient grace of the Father of our spirits as it is made supremely manifest in Jesus Christ. In personal fellowship with God, and with the sense of His pervading Providence in all things we may be assured that not even the worst calamities of our time will avail to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And in this confidence we shall have no doubt that the business of the Kingdom, however much it may be delayed by human pride and folly, will finally prosper till it reaches its consummation. Though we must pray for the Kingdom to come on earth, and direct our energies to that end, we may well believe that the final goal will be beyond history. But somewhere, somehow, the goal will be reached, and we shall arrive at that blessed destination whose glory and delight will more than justify the long, toilsome journey which, as we have travelled along it so painfully and haltingly, has so often seemed but the pursuit of an empty dream. Such hopeful assurance comes of the grace of God, but the way to its fulfilment can be no other than the way of freedom.

W. E. HOUGH.