

What has become of Heaven and Hell ?

THE apostle Paul, justifying his ready and hopeful acceptance of death whenever it should come, asserted that, "Not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life." (2 *Corinthians* 5 : 4.) Death is thus accepted not as a deliverance from the weariness of life or despair of it, but as a negative means to a glorious positive end. So we shall be not sartorial anachronisms in the celestial world for God will clothe us with a spiritual body, matching us with His hour and scene.

There are fashions in thoughts as well as in clothes and there is necessity as well as satisfaction in changing with the fashion in either case. The merit lies not in the intermediate nakedness, if such there be, but in what succeeds it; not in being unclothed but in being clothed upon. When we have outgrown a suit of clothes or the thought of an era, the great requirement is not sartorial or mental nakedness but in being reclothed in accordance with the standards and requirements of the new age.

Daily now are we reminded that we have outgrown this theory or that standard. This principle is no longer valid; that conception is now discredited. Nor can we deny that whatever we know of the eternal has been conveyed to us in temporal form. All articulation belongs to a place and a time. This is inescapable and indisputable. But this acknowledgment by itself is exceedingly incomplete and inadequate. We are creatures of time and space. Really we can know the eternal only as it takes flesh and dwells among us. Plato said that we can know these things only by means of a myth and of Jesus it was said, "And without a parable spake he not unto them." (*Matthew* 13 : 34.) Herein lies not only the validity and necessity of demythologizing (which by itself can be a grave deprivation) but the urgent necessity of re-mythologizing the eternal. Otherwise the believing soul, who has recognized the eternal only through temporal and spatial forms now discarded, is left in a cold and dreary world of bloodless "isms" and "ologies," of lifeless concepts and generalities and his shivering disillusioned soul cries out, "They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him." Walter M. Horton says of Tillich, "All theology, as he sees it, has two principal tasks; to state the eternal message and to relate it to existing culture—Barth's "kerygmatic" theology performs the first of these tasks admirably—but he refuses, as though it were a treason, the apologetic task of interpreting the

message to the contemporary situation." (pp. 30-31, *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, (ed.) Kegley and Bretall.)

In this connection eschatology has proved to be a subject of special difficulty, perhaps more to the preacher as such than to the theologian. Eschatology takes us to remote time or beyond time, to this world in its final phase as well as worlds beyond. Analogies drawn from this scene and age have therefore inevitably a somewhat precarious validity and relevance. For this reason we should appreciate the restraint shown in scripture. Little is given that could satisfy mere curiosity. Yet in scripture we see restraint, not suppression. What is given is imparted in forms drawn from contemporary scenes and literature, e.g., Gehenna was a necessary hygienic incinerator outside the walls of Jerusalem. This is but one of the many instances of local and temporal illustration of what is eternal. For form and myth are a human necessity. The twentieth century is not superior to the first in this.

We can apprehend the unknown only in terms of the known. Bare intellectual abstractions will never satisfy the human heart. Pictures will break through even when we intend to resist them. John Henry Newman said,

I do not ask to see the distant scene,
but was soon showing us "Those angel faces smile" which he had
"loved long since, and lost awhile."
Bernard of Morlaix admitted,

I know not, oh, I know not,
What joys await us there

but two lines later added,

They stand those halls of Zion,
All jubilant with song,
And bright with many an angel,
And all the martyr throng.

Here we can so readily see the form that is dated and the content that is dateless. We can also trace in the country around Bedford, scenes which in the *Pilgrim's Progress* become the material vessel in which spiritual truths and values were carried, e.g., the Slough of Despond, the House Beautiful, the Hill Difficulty. Robert Browning in his poem "Saint Praxed's Church," depicts the bishop, having given details concerning his tomb, as anticipating,

Then how shall I lie through centuries,
And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,
And see God made and eaten all day long,
And feel the steady candle flame, and taste
Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!

But, alas, in this task of re-mythologizing, human frailty may be very operative. We may take the disciplines of Jesus and give to them an alien austerity and in so doing,

Magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.

And in portraying Heaven and Hell, we may not only invest them with felicities and horrors scripture does not sanction, but claim that those very attributions are not temporary forms of expression but the abiding content of the truth itself.

Such extravagance seems to know no bounds and can only incite disbelief and ridicule. One thinks of the old lady who assured her vicar that Heaven would not be Heaven for her, if Fido, her dog, were not there. How easily cynicism is incited by such extravagance. Robert Burns, when spending a Sunday at Berrywell in the Lammermuirs at the home of his friend, Robert Ainslee, attended worship with the family and sat next to Robert's charming sister, Rachel, for whom the poet had a warm regard, as he had for so many other fair ladies. While the minister was thundering his denunciations from the pulpit, Robert noticed that Rachel was deeply moved and sat with her head bowed. Robert took her book and on the fly-leaf wrote,

Fair maid, you need not take the hint
Nor idle texts pursue;
'Twas guilty sinners that he meant,
Not angels such as you.

Such is the nemesis that awaits exaggeration and extravagance to which also may partly be attributed the silence which raises our question, What has become of Heaven and Hell?

We now consider, then, the abiding content. The transition that death brings, while abrupt and unimaginable, is only incidental to the most fundamental aspect of human life. Enormous as must be the differences between life here in a physical body and life hereafter in a spiritual body, they are trivial compared with what is common between these two stages of human life. The moral values here have eternal currency; the conditions for fellowship with God are the same in eternity as in time. The gulf between evil and goodness here continues within the veil, and in the radiance of eternity is seen to be wider than ever imagined here and, as far as man knows, permits of no transit from one side to the other.

It is easy for the average man to deduce that as death reduces the physical frame to dust, it may treat in a similar manner what is left of man, his spirit. Do we not unhesitatingly sing,

Till in the ocean of Thy love,
We lose ourselves in heaven above?

We are thus seen as a tiny wavelet of a brief moment which, although it

Drew from out the boundless deep,
Turns again home.

But this will not do and it goes too far. And the poet who coined that phrase, in more thoughtful mood assured us that

Eternal form will still divide
The eternal soul from all beside.

M. E. Dahl says, "Body in St. Paul means the whole personality, and resurrection means the restoration—the final salvation—of that unified personality. Hence it is vital to insist on the word identity as describing this relationship, because the whole idea has no meaning unless it is the same personality that is to be raised that exists now." (*The Resurrection of the Body*, p. 94.)

Our bodies are part of our solidarity with nature and our race, a garment loaned to us for a time (and many are thus borrowed for a full life-time). At death we are invested with a spiritual body which finds a new unity in the City of God without thereby losing its identity.

In the main the final condition of the godless is conceived in three ways. It is believed that their antagonism to God will exist in all eternity; or that such antagonism will reach a stage where death will ensue; or finally that all such antagonism will die out and the erstwhile human race will become a spiritually homogenous whole. The "Great gulf" will have been bridged. Certain "proof texts" of differing value can be found for each of these views and other support has been adduced for them. Space forbids a close analysis of these but certain considerations should be noted.

Each view is based on an unproved assumption, e.g., in the first, that some human beings will be antagonistic to God forever; the second, that the soul by nature is not immortal and at some stage even after death may presumably degenerate to a condition that involves extinction; the third, that all will ultimately return to God (for which we have no evidence) or will be coerced by God (which would be a violation of His nature).

Further, seeking some analogy in human life, we cannot fail to notice how that antagonism to God gains momentum with every act of sin, and that character and conduct, as they unfold and become enriched, become increasingly rigid, leaving less room for moral reform or degeneracy. The spiritual crack of what may become the "great gulf" begins to harden and widen in mortal life. Moreover whenever Jesus justified the judgments of the Last Day, He referred to what was done in mortal life and never made any allusion to the final judgment being influenced by post-mortem con-

siderations. Above all, each theory proclaims that so long as the finite spirit rebels against God, so long will that spirit suffer. Nothing can be found to justify an easy-going assumption that "Good will be the final goal of ill."

Yet it is possible that each of the above theories has a partial truth which will find its place in a synthesis beyond human comprehension.

In this connection consideration has to be given to the destiny of millions who have never heard of Christ. They cannot have ignored light they have never seen nor rejected a salvation of which they have never heard. The destiny of such can be left to the judgment of an all-wise and loving God. If human frailty needs some measure of solution, perhaps help can be found in the poet Cowper who wrote :

Is virtue then, unless of Christian growth,
Mere fallacy, or foolishness, or both?
Ten thousand sages lost in endless woe,
For ignorance of what they could not know?
That speech betrays at once a bigot's tongue—
Charge not a God with such outrageous wrong!
Truly, not I—the partial light men have,
My creed persuades me, well employed may save;

But still in virtue of a Saviour's plea,
Not blind by choice, but destined not to see.
(“Truth” 515-530)

The doctrine of Last Things presents itself in two forms; on the one hand, as the destiny of the human soul, and on the other hand, as the consummation of all things, the complete fulfilment of the divine purpose on earth. The latter is a heritage from Hebrew thought to which God was most definitely a God of history. Plato's perfect world was a world of ideas and it could not, as the New Jerusalem could, descend to earth. Jehovah, however, would manifest and ultimately fulfil His purpose in historical acts and, "All flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." (*Isaiah* 40 : 5.) The time came when the national fortunes had sunk low, as had the morale of the people, and the prophetic mind was inspired to see that the final fulfilment would be "trans-historical." Eschaton crossed the frontier of time and space without entirely leaving it. In the meantime the conception of personal immortality became more clearly conceived and was deeply involved in the Eschaton. These two views are found in unity in the New Testament, and Paul gives a clear though cryptic description of this, "Up to the present, we know, the whole created universe groans

in all its parts as if in the pangs of childbirth. Not only so, but even we, to whom the spirit is given as first fruits of the harvest to come are groaning inwardly while we wait for God to make us His sons." (*Romans 8 : 22-24, N.E.B.*)

The individual and his universe are vitally interdependent. The New Testament calls for a new heart and a new Jerusalem. And in heaven no man will be lost in God, nor lost to his brethren. Even there, no man will be an island.

Hell, like Gehenna of old, is out of bounds to the Holy City. Hell's deepest meaning is the loss of the divine presence, the complete absence of fellowship with God and a condition of final unalterable alienation from Him. It may, however, be said that the depraved and rebellious carry such disabilities in a lesser degree here quite comfortably and would feel that what we call our concern over their "lost condition" was quite mistaken and gratuitous. We need not deny that feeling; much less, still, should we think that the importation of actual flames would provide an incentive to reform. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets," especially if they deliberately reject the gospel, neither will they repent though the imported flames be blown to a nuclear intensity. Jesus saw no value in the following He received from those who sought Him only for the loaves and fishes, neither would He see more value in the following of those who sought Him only to escape the thermal discomforts of their anticipated future state.

It may, however, be said that the above contention would deprive the gospel armoury of one of its most valuable weapons. But would it, we may ask. This weapon has become coated with rust. It has had little use in the last half century and certainly was not worthy of a place in that armoury and is there not a good substitute to take its place? Rudolf Bultmann says, "These mythological conceptions of heaven and hell are no longer acceptable for modern men since for scientific thinking to speak of "above" and "below" in the universe has lost all meaning, but the transcendence of God and of evil is still significant." (P. 20, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*.) We should not fail to appreciate the value of this statement or to recognize that it is "for scientific thinking." The preacher has, however, to address many of another kind of thinking and he would need to re-clothe or re-mythologize "transcendence" lest the wayfaring man dismiss it as a polysyllabic hieroglyphic.

Nevertheless this profound truth should not be lost on us. Evil infinitely transcends in significance and consequence any unwilling change in our lives. It becomes a constituent, and in time a determinant, of those who entertain it. It is pregnant with destiny and will confront us at the last day. May it not be that the direst revelation on that day will be to see ourselves as we truly are. And partial insights of this kind are given us here below. Coming judgments

cast their illumination before them and out of our own mind and heart comes our condemnation, prophetic of the final judgment. History and literature abound with examples. Norman Cameron, a contemporary poet, describes the invader in a poem of that title. He wins all that he sought—and more—an insight into its illusory character.

Our shops and farms wide open lie;
Still the invader feels a lack :

Invader—outcast of all lands,
He lives condemned to gorge and crave,
To foul his feast with his own hands :
At once the oppressor and the slave.

In the fiction of John Galsworthy a picture of a white monkey has a prominent place. The monkey referred to is looking upon the remnants of stolen fruit. But in his eyes are no delight and satisfaction but resentment and anger born of disillusionment. This represented the disillusionment of an age marked by lust and greed.

Shakespeare depicts Macbeth immediately after having secured the murder of King Duncan, not rejoicing in success and the avenue of accession it opened to him to power, but rather exclaiming,

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality :
All is but toys : renown and grace is dead.

(*Macbeth*, Act II, Scene 3, 75-80.)

Surpassing all this is the tragic cry of Judas Iscariot, "I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood." (*Matthew* 27 : 4.) Financial gains, the Quisling advantage of favour with the occupying power and the disappearance of One who had repudiated a false Messianic hope, all these are not worth a thought compared with the moral illumination in which the true nature of that murderous disloyalty is seen and which burdens the conscience and breaks the heart. Bring all the blast furnaces together into one inferno; that will provide but a feeble and clumsy picture or myth of the remorse that rends the soul with this confession and hastens its bearer to a suicide's grave.

Heaven has been described as partly a clearer vision of God, a

deeper fellowship with Him and a closer unity in Him. To some this has meant the consummation of the mystic rapture, where the many are absorbed in the One and all experience is one endless ecstasy. But in philosophy, while the Absolute gives both content and significance to the part, it nevertheless leaves the part inviolate; so in religion, the deepest communion with God should leave the personality of the participant unimpaired. He who said, "I and my Father are one," was at the same time One whose personality was the most distinctive among the sons of men. Moreover there is no reason why in worlds beyond, God's works should not be as manifold as they are here. And as the course of evolution has brought ever increasing differentiation with ever deepening unity, so may the greater unity with God carry with it a richer fellowship with the "ten thousand times ten thousand" and the proof of the old assumption,

There is room for new creations
In that upper world of bliss.

But we shall find our best clues to the unseen, not in God as creator but in God as Father. Heaven is the home prepared by Him for His children after their earthly pilgrimage. Jesus left to prepare a place for His followers. It is the native place of the human soul, as Hell is not. This is rather a foreign place to which are consigned those who are acclimatized to it by their repudiation of sonship and their adoption of an alien mode of life. Thus they reach a destiny never intended for them. So Jesus says to them on the right hand, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you." But unto those on the left hand He says, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared" (not for man but) "for the devil and his angels."

Thus with all the strangeness which will accompany our advent in the unseen, will be the consciousness that we have arrived in what is truly our native place, prepared as much for us as Eden was for Adam. Moreover, while a "colony of heaven" (*Phil. 3: 20*) may yield limited disclosures of the ethos and the pattern of life there, in Christ Jesus we have the perfect embodiment of that life beyond. Plato, seeking to define justice, portrayed it "writ large" in his ideal city. For the salvation of man, Christ became flesh and dwelt among us and, as we beheld His glory, we saw also heaven "writ small." He was its ideal citizen.

But be this all that it may, one great question remains for the preacher. It is: The valid use of the future. The poet Burns declared that

The fear of Hell's a hangman's whip
To hold a wretch in order,

and certainly the fear of hell on the lips of some preachers Burns heard was decidedly that. But that couplet could not be accepted as a valid indictment for all use of that future. Further, Francis Xavier said,

My God I love Thee not because
I hope for heaven thereby

Were the hope of heaven the only or chief cause for love of God, such a love would be entirely unworthy of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But rightly conceived hell should inspire fear and heaven deepen love for God. Such conceptions should have a valid place in the preacher's armoury.

Is there anything unworthy in the amateur pianist while grinding at her scales, hearing faintly in the distant future her rendering of the Moonlight Sonata, a fugue of Bach's or the Hallelujah Chorus? Are we prejudicing the mind of the student who scorns delights and lives laborious days to succeed in examinations, if we indicate to him the skills he will command and the services he will be able to render to the community, if he passes those examinations? Is it unbecoming of a doctor, treating a patient who desires to cure her malignant growth with an aspirin, to disclose the future consequences of that growth if neglected? Is it not altogether fanciful to plead for that singleness of mind, that disregard of the future, that would love the scales, the examinations and the operation for their own sake? The issues are too urgent to permit of such fastidiousness. Jesus certainly thought that that could be so in other directions. "If thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched." (*Mark 9:43.*)

On the other hand may we not deprive the persecuted and the handicapped, the suffering and the dying of much needed comfort and hope by drawing a veil across those vistas of heaven which scripture, with all its restraint, has disclosed for the good of man? A popular jibe of old was that a man preoccupied with heaven was of no earthly use. But *Psalms* 84 tells us of pilgrims who, while far from the Holy City, had its "ways in their hearts." But that did not make them indifferent to the intermediate stages. In passing through the Valley of Baca they made it a well. With Jerusalem "on the brain" they turned swamps into springs. And their successors on the pilgrim road today, who are mindful of what is prepared for them within the veil, will not be less zealous over slum clearance, help for the refugees, better relations between management and labour and many other reforms. Such pilgrims know that "hearts are brave and hopes are strong," when there steals on the ear "the distant warrior song." Dr. C. F. Garbett, when Bishop of Southwark, said to ordinands on the eve of their ordination to the

priesthood, "Tomorrow you will stand before me and I will ask you, Will you? Will you? Will you? One day you must stand before the Lord, who will ask, Have you? Have you? Have you?" Surely a valid and a fruitful contemplation!

In this ramble through the notes and hints above one seems to detect a development in theological thought that follows, however unconsciously, somewhat of the pattern of the Hegelian dialectic. In the confident and exuberant thought of the Victorian era, we see the thesis; in our own period we have seen searching analysis and constructive criticism resembling the Antithesis and on this foundation we may see in time a new structure of positive and creative thought, the Synthesis, which

May make one music as before
But vaster.

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NOTES

(concluded from p. 351)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 109 f.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁹ Clark, John, et al, *The Voice of Jubilee: A Narrative of the Baptist Mission, Jamaica, from the Commencement*, London, John Snow, 1865, pp. 31 f.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

²¹ *Idem.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²³ *Idem.*

²⁴ Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁶ *An Hundredfold*, pp. 11 f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22 f.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

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