

Kenneth Scott Latourette

1884—1968

A Tribute

WHEN Dr. K. S. Latourette, Professor of Missions for over forty years at Yale University, died after being struck by a car on 26th December 1968, in Oregon, his home city, the Church lost one of its greatest historians and saints. Reading his works has given twentieth century Christians a sense of wonder at what God has done in history and sure hope for the continued success and final triumph of the Gospel. To know him was, indeed, a liberal education—as a teacher, enthusiastic and inspiring—as a man, warm-hearted and steady—as a Christian, serene and joyful. Like every student of Church History in my generation, I knew of Dr. Latourette and his work, but the occasion to meet and know him came in 1960. He was Special Lecturer to a group of twenty Christians from almost as many countries and branches of the Church, which was spending a year in ecumenical fellowship and study at Union Theological Seminary, New York. I remember clearly the Autumn morning when he walked briskly into the common-room, with the smallest of attaché-cases (said to contain his lecture-notes—lecture notes which he seldom had cause to consult, since all names, dates and happenings seemed to be neatly and indelibly stored and docketed in his memory). He introduced himself: “Good morning, I’m Latourette (but everybody calls me Uncle Ken!)” He was so pleased to know I was from Wales, and even more pleased to hear I was a Baptist: “So am I—as I always say—by heredity, inertia and conviction.” Nobody ever boasted less of his denominational alignment, but no one was ever so proud of what was of special value in his own tradition: as Dr. Ernest A. Payne said in his “Salute to Dr. Latourette”, a tribute on his eightieth birthday, in *The Baptist Quarterly*: “He has been truly catholic and ecumenical in his appraisals and in his sympathies, but unswervingly loyal to his Baptist convictions.” This was his basic attitude and it was also his advice to his students: to have a thorough knowledge of one’s own branch of the Church and loyalty to it, coupled with a recognition of its place in the Universal Church and appreciation of the work and worship of the whole body of Christ at all times and in all places.

His course of lectures and seminars on “The Christian Church throughout the World: its tasks and problems” will illustrate, as

well as anything, his methods, beliefs and hopes. For details he referred us to his monumental work, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (1939-45), which the Public Orator of Oxford University described as "a seven-fold shield against the bolts of ignorance". Less conscientious scholars could learn a little from his one-volume *History of Christianity* (1954), and students with restricted modern horizons could pick up the necessary facts from the five-volume history of Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*, whose title, he said, had been a long time taking its final form: he decided that "Christianity" was a more satisfactory designation than "The Church", since any religion has influence outside and over and above its institutions.

Dr. Latourette opened every session with prayer: brief, extempore, enlightened and warm, for example: "As we think today, O Lord, about all nations, let us not forget every man"; and "Heavenly Father, as we look at the map, grant us to see the world as the world for which Christ died, and let us not be discouraged, because faith, hope and love remain"; and again: "Let us see with the eyes of Christ. Let us remember that in all nations there are thousands, yes, millions, for whom Christ died".

Once the prayer was over, down to facts, and they tumbled out. Any query by an interrupting student was answered with an array of relevant data, and an invitation to further accidental excursions, and he always clinched his statements with his favourite expression: "Yes indeed" or "I declare".

He dealt with the world of Islam, Latin America and Africa South of the Sahara (always "Sahéra" for him) but he was most at home when he was dealing with his beloved China, where he had gone as a young missionary in 1910, and when discussing the Missionary enterprise of the 19th century, which to him represented Christianity at its militant best. Everything was offered as a basis for the Churches' understanding of their tasks and problems in the modern world. What remains in the memory is the enormous range of his historical knowledge, the agility of his on-the-spot judgements and his relating of the past experience of the Church in all kinds of situations to its present opportunities and problems. And how refreshing were his asides:

"This is a terribly quick crash-course. If you drop your pencil, you are liable to lose a country."

"The missionaries and the merchants went to Asia together. I recall how, when I went to China fifty years ago, seeing a representative of the Sunlight Soap Company from Liverpool selling soap at every stop on the route of the Trans-Siberian Railway."

"I like the story about the American lady, concerned about the doctrine of Papal infallibility, asking Bishop X if the Holy Father ever made mistakes. 'Oh, yes!' he said, 'Although he

should know me by now, the last time I was in Rome he called me Bishop Y."

To illustrate the amazing expansion of cities in the United States: "Chicago, in my grandfather's time, was a small village."

His personal reminiscences were always interesting.

"I had an audience of Pope Pius XI, and he was gracious enough to accept one of my books. After I heard him give a two-hour address on a Sunday afternoon and saw him receiving visitors for four hours, I was convinced that being a Pope is tremendously hard work."

He knew the pioneers of the Ecumenical Movement (he was one of the leaders who drew up the proposed Constitution of the World Council of Churches at Utrecht in 1938), and he had particular regard for Archbishop Söderblom of Uppsala, whom he had heard singing "The ninety and nine" while shaving, and playing the organ at the Cathedral because the Lutheran organist was against helping the singing in non-denominational worship.

He was not surprised that the white man's Christianity did not make more headway in China, because he had seen a notice in parks in the cities: "Chinese and dogs not admitted".

His Christian principles never led him to over-simplify world problems:

"I'm a Christian Pacifist by conviction," he said, in the autumn of 1960, "but I'm glad I'm not General Eisenhower or whoever has got to face the next few months."

He had a child-like belief in God's dealings with men, and especially in what Pope John XXIII once called "The Lord's surprise moves", and one of his favourite stories was about Robert Morrison, China's first Protestant Missionary (1807), being asked, cynically, by a ship-owner: "And you are going to make an impression on the Emperor?" answering, "No, *God* can."

The next moment he was delighting us with the story of Peter Parker, the American missionary, a Yale graduate in Theology and Medicine, who is "said to have been given a certificate on condition he would not preach or practice in the United States of America", and so was used by God to "open China at the point of a lancet".

In all things we are to trust God's providence. There is a Christian attitude of reverent agnosticism: "We may be a minority. Real Christians have *always* been a minority, and who they are only God knows. God only knows how his grace works".

Minority or not, he was hopeful of the 950 million people who bear Christ's name. He has been accused of over-optimism ("Winning *all men* to Christian discipleship"), and being too naïve in his theory of ebb and tide in the life of the Church, but he continued to the end to maintain that geographically, the Church "is more widely spread than ever before", "more firmly rooted among more different people than ever before", "more world-conscious than ever in its history and more culturally and socially effective than at any

period". Dr. Horton Davies sums up his contribution admirably:

"No one in our time has written global and expansionist Church History with greater success . . . its ecumenical concern, its combination of objectivity and sympathy, as well as its broad sweep and erudition, make it invaluable."

In 1962, Dr. Latourette was given an honorary Doctorate in Divinity in the University of Wales. Other European Universities which had similarly honoured him were Oxford, Glasgow and Marburg. He makes special mention of the Welsh distinction on the dust-cover of the last volume of *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*. He travelled from his home-town of Oregon—a distance both ways, of over 6,000 miles—to receive the degree, at Swansea. What he admired most in the ceremony was the reception by the Warden to the ranks of the Guild of Graduates, a custom which he had not encountered in any of the fifteen universities of which he was an honorary graduate.

He filled his ten days in Wales to the brim—an afternoon lecture in Ebenezer, Swansea, which gave him immense pleasure because it was held in the church where Griffith John, the Congregationalist missionary to China, had been brought up: a Sunday morning inter-denominational service at the Tabernacl Baptist Church, Llandudno, Sunday evening at Bangor Cathedral; an afternoon session at the Llandudno Fraternal; civic receptions there and at Wrexham where, at the Parish Church, he had what he regarded as one of the greatest honours of his life, preaching from the pulpit of the church where the benefactor of his beloved University of Yale, Elihu Yale, was buried. He broadcast in the Welsh Home Service religious programme. At Saron, Llandybie Baptist Church vestry in Carmarthen-shire, he was thrilled to see a photo of Timothy Richard. He recalled: "He was the first Missionary I met when I went as a young man to China. He asked me: 'Young man, what do you intend to do here?' I replied: 'Teach (teach school)', and he retorted, 'I don't mean *that*, I mean what are your plans for China?'" He ranked Timothy Richard with the great Jesuit Missionary in China, Matthew Ricci (1552-1610).

Nothing escaped his notice. He liked the Welsh big-seat, the *sêt fawr*, which he had not seen anywhere else on his world travels. He *would* go up Snowdon but, much to his regret, in the "little train", the *trên bach*, not on foot. He visited the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show in Wrexham, and was most intrigued by the pony-trotting.

The most sacred memory of his visit, to me, however, was his request: "Can I come to prayer-meeting with you?". And he came and spoke to the faithful few on that Monday evening at Tabernacl, Llandudno, with the same humility, true scholarship and optimism as he did when addressing his young friends in the ecumenical group in 1960. And his message was:

"God's method of working is to make us men not robots. He

gave men free will to crucify his Son. . . .
 "If I am to have sons, they must be free to reject or accept. . . .
 Thou cam'st a little baby-thing
 That made a woman cry.

The crucifixion seemed complete frustration. We can't fully penetrate God's mind. Humanly speaking, the Cross is foolishness, but the weakness of God is stronger than men! Where all will end we don't know, but it is our faith that all things are summed up in Christ. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. How, we don't know, but God is working and will be triumphant."

D. EIRWYN MORGAN

(Professor Morgan paid this tribute to Dr. Latourette in the radio programme, "Word and Work" from Wales on Friday, 18 April 1969. It is reproduced by courtesy of the B.B.C.)

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF INDUSTRIAL MISSION?

(Concluded from p. 110)

NOTES

¹ R. P. Taylor, "Industrial Mission," *The Baptist Quarterly*, Volume XXII Number 1 (January 1969), p. 13.

² Not only has the Church failed to communicate to the working masses for several generations, but today we leave essentially unreached those who are the opinion-formers of society as well. One is almost forced to view the contemporary Church in Britain as a mere appendix to society, off on a side-track while the mainstream of humanity travels by, giving us little if any notice. This is a dark picture but one we must recognize and one that should move us into an aggressive mission outreach.

³ Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ Bryan Green, *The Practice of Evangelism* (London; Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), p. 149.

⁷ Douglas Webster, *What is Evangelism* (London 1964), p. 154.

⁸ Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 9 (Italics mine).

⁹ William Barkley, *Turning to God* (London 1963), p. 102.

¹⁰ No necessary chronological sequence is implied here.

¹¹ It could be argued, though space once again prohibits more than simply mentioning the issue, that the way to change society most lastingly and effectively is to help bring about a radical change in the individual. After all, it is human beings that make up society and it seems that converted lives help most effectively to make for a converted society. Perhaps Mr. Taylor is putting the cart before the horse.

¹² Culbert G. Rutenber, *The Reconciling Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1960), p. 127.

¹³ *On the Other Side* (London, 1968), p. 164, 177.

¹⁴ Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

L. DRUMMOND