

## Modernism and the New Testament.

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FOR authority in religion, the old cry of "Back to the Bible" has in recent theology been modified to the truer cry of "Back to Christ." But Modernism, judged by its most prominent exponents, would take the cry back farther still. "Back," it says, "to the formal religious sense." "Back to the religious idea common to mankind."

It is the almost entire reliance on subjective authority, the undue depreciation of external fact, which marks the Modernist position, that we should venture to consider an almost grotesque exaggeration, and a hasty rush from a perhaps too great tyranny of Church or Bible to a want of recognition of any external authority, without which no system, religious or otherwise, can possibly for long survive. We have to ask: "Is spiritual authority entirely subjective, fluid, in the making? or is there any part of it which is objective?"

To this latter question the Modernist would return an uncompromising "No." But in an age when scientific research is leading its students to believe in some objective spiritual reality to which all the manifestations of natural law must be referred, we may with the more certainty believe that there is some real objective truth for the soul of man to which it may appeal as authoritative; and, further, because as Christians we must, so, upon the basis of historic fact, we may, appeal to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ as such objective authority.

We cannot be satisfied with thinking of Him as merely the highest embodiment of human conscience or an idealization of human faith. Yet that is all that Jesus means to the Modernist, who refuses to admit objective facts in His life, and cannot see, except in the dimmest manner, any permanent authoritative teaching in His words, for those, in so far as we have them, are in Modernism's view almost entirely concerned with a

conception which was not even His own, but borrowed from contemporary Jewish thought, of the nearness of a catastrophic end of the world.

To us the central fact of the life of Christ is that He really rose again from the dead. But for the Modernist the Resurrection is truth in faith, not in fact. "The Resurrection," says Father Tyrrell, "is a visionary presentment of spiritual immortality. What the Apostles saw was a vision of their own faith in His spiritual triumph and Resurrection in the transcendental and eternal order, a vision externalized by the very intensity of their faith, a vision that was Divine just because the faith which produced it was Divine."

So the other events in Jesus Christ's life are not to the Modernist objective realities at all, but the creations of the faith of the early Christians.

And to the Modernist no particular dogma as to Jesus Christ is true or untrue. "Do you ask," says Mr. Lilley, "whether the Modernist really believes in the Divinity of our Lord or in miracles? The habit of mind out of which such questions can arise is too obviously obtuse to the whole Modernist position. Modernism is, above all things, a denial that dogma is a sum of truth. It insists that it is a body of truth, fashioned by the soul of truth which inhabits it, and *in time* providing that soul with a means of expression."

To the Modernist there is, indeed, a transcendent world of ultimate realities, and a Divine power which works therein. Nor is it without effect upon this world in which we live: it makes for righteousness, and without it all human moral progress would be impossible. But it cannot really express itself. Each age adopts a symbolism of it suitable to its own particular mind and needs. And the age of the New Testament certainly did not adopt an authoritative symbolism of this transcendent world, because the symbols it used—the kingdom of God, hell, heaven, Satan—teach rather eschatology than morality.

But when we say "Christianity is Christ," we mean belief in an historic Jesus of Nazareth who was the Christ, trust in an

objective Divine revelation made by Him—in symbols certainly, because language - communication means symbolism (but no other expression of truth is possible), yet, in enduring symbols, which contain in them, although they are perhaps even yet largely unexplored territory, all that the material world can know of the transcendent, and sufficient to link the two together.

And to say that we believe in an historic Jesus of Nazareth brings us immediately to the claims of the New Testament. The Modernist's thought of the New Testament is the corollary of his thought of the person and work of Christ. To him, of course, it is only a first century (or, more truly, largely a second century) Christian presentment of the ideas of the general religious sentiment of mankind which justified themselves to the needs of the humanity of that time. It presents, therefore, to him only a temporary phase of thought and a particular systematization of knowledge, and is an interesting survival of the beliefs of a long-past age. But it can thus be of no permanent value to the Christian of other ages than its own, except in so far as it corresponds to the mind and needs of the particular age and his own conscience and reason.

In itself, moreover, to the Modernist the New Testament presents few features which he wishes to regard as permanently authoritative. Obsessed by the thought of apocalyptic as the sole characteristic of the New Testament age, he regards the Fourth Gospel (just because it contains less of it) as a second-century work, as a construction of faith rather than a record of fact; and in the Synoptists themselves, which he dimly sees to be not wholly eschatological, he finds the theological and ecclesiastical preoccupations of the second Christian generation.

It is thus in virtue of his religious sense that the Modernist rejects the claims of the New Testament to be anything more than a tolerably correct picture of what that same religious sense was some eighteen centuries ago.

*It is also in virtue of something subjective which we recognize as of Divine authority—i.e., the virtue of reason and conscience*

*within—that we take the exactly opposite point of view as to the claims of the New Testament.* We claim that, as Arthur Hallam said of his own experience, so eighteen centuries of experience, and not least the experience of the present time, has said about the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Bible: “It fits human hearts as a key fits a lock.”

We do not recognize the Bible as authority simply because it has been made to pose as such.

We quite agree with the Modernist that any external authority can alone be appreciated as valid, and obtain our obedience, as Christian men, when it corresponds with spiritual experience and wins the sanction of our conscience and reason. We certainly do not claim for the Bible that it is to be accepted as an authority from the outside, irrespective of its appeal to our reason and conscience. But we claim, because of the Divine element present in the Holy Scriptures, that where they do not so appeal either to a generation, a race, or an individual, the fault is not to be attributed to the temporary nature of the revelation itself, but to the limitations of human knowledge combined with the pride of human intellect, and to the warp of human will caused by sin.

Moreover, frankly, we think that the reason why the Modernist finds in the New Testament only a contemporary photograph of a long-past religious sense springs from a view of the documents which compose it, which is historically defective.

The fact of Christianity is too great a miracle for our credence, if in the Gospels, the sole records of the life of its founder, there “remains,” as Loisy says, “but an echo, necessarily weakened and a little confused, of the words of Jesus, the general impression He produced upon hearers well disposed towards Him”—and this in an early second century dress.

We say that such a view negatives any idea of inspiration which is worthy of the name. And for us without some inspiration the appearance of such a character as the Jesus delineated in the four Gospels is unbelievable. What else has the early

second century Christian imagination produced that we should think of it as capable of such a superhuman *tour de force*? The Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Epistles of Clement and Ignatius! The early second century Christian literature—all the Christian literature before A.D. 200—is most meagre in quantity, and oftentimes puerile in quality. The greatest gulf is fixed between it and the New Testament. And yet we are asked to believe that it produced entirely the marvellous Fourth Gospel (and the Modernist admits the marvel of its composition as much as we do) and gave their distinctive character to the other three. And this conception of a second-century origin of our central documents—this old Tübingen hypothesis dished up again, merely with its fatuous differentiation between Paulinism and Petrinism taken away—we are asked to accept at a time when criticism itself is distinctly swinging back to a more conservative position, when Harnack defends the Lukan authorship of the Third Gospel and the Acts, and Johann Weiss urges, in a recent book, the personal knowledge by Paul of our Lord Himself, and the close connection between the two.

We do not and cannot admit that all we get in the New Testament is the early second century Christian idea of Christ, or even the first-century idea. The figure of Jesus of Nazareth is so infinitely above any other creation of the highest literary genius that we emphatically disbelieve in such a colouring and adaptation of it as amount to a creation, at the hands of a community of men who by their history, their environment, and by their other records which have come down to us, have shown themselves conspicuously unendowed with literary skill or the power of artistic conception. And yet can anyone, with the records before him and the history of the Christian centuries behind him, doubt the skill, the grace, the power of the conception of the Jesus of the Gospels?

Yet to believe that in Jesus Christ, as conceived in the New Testament, we have an objective authority for all time, does not mean that there is no room for the principle of *development*, for

which the Modernist stands. For we may agree with him that the setting of the portrait of Jesus Christ in the New Testament is of the first century—is Eastern, is at least in part Judaic.

There is change of taste at various epochs as to the kind of frame which suits a picture. In the differing aspects of Christ's person and work given us by the Synoptists and by St. John we find an early instance of such a change of taste.

In the setting, then, of the central picture of the New Testament there is room for and need for development. This is surely suggested in the mission of the Holy Spirit, "to take the things of Christ and to show them to men"; "to guide into all truth." Does not this imply that the form in which the Divine Revelation is conveyed will differ and develop, while its substance does not change?

Let us take, for example, two parts of the framework in which alteration and development has lawfully taken place.

#### 1. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL TEACHING OF JESUS CHRIST.

We disclaim the Modernist contention that the Apocalyptic elements in the teaching of Jesus were essential and the moral only subordinate.

We deny that the *whole* teaching of Jesus as to the "kingdom of God" represented it as a speedy and catastrophic upheaval entirely apart from all human life and conditions, for we know that sometimes, as in the Parable of the Mustard Seed, it is represented as a natural evolution from within. Moreover, we do not feel that the permanent import of the revelation of Jesus is affected by the very extensive amount of eschatological teaching which we allow His words contain; for that teaching, so far from being falsified by events (as Modernism says), found its justification in the destruction of Jerusalem, the bankruptcy of the old creeds as evidenced by Emperor-worship, the setting up of the Church. In very truth these were, and though not in the whole sense in which first-century Christians

imagined such an end and coming, an "end of the age" and a "coming of the kingdom."

Yet, nevertheless, we recognize that the New Testament, as written at a time when social and moral conditions were so bad that a remedy for their ills seemed likely to be found rather in a catastrophic change from without than in a gradual evolution of the best from within, laid more stress on eschatology, on the immediacy of the end, than most subsequent centuries have, and than the present century either can or ought to.

We recognize that there has lawfully been a development in the way in which the New Testament eschatology has been appreciated. We may rightly allow that in the application of Jesus Christ to the modern world, when the revolution in physical science makes men look both at the beginning and the end of created things rather as gradual evolutionary processes than as single catastrophic acts, greater stress should now be laid on that other part of the teaching of Jesus Christ which tells us that God's sickle will be only put in when the corn of the earth is fully ripe.

## 2. THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF JESUS CHRIST.

In the framework in which this, too, appears in the Gospels, we recognize that there are parts which apply to the age for which the New Testament was written, and which, by lawful development, have given way now to something larger and more elaborate.

We might take, for example, the social status of womanhood, especially in the Pauline conception. But I prefer to take the question of slavery. Not only the Old Testament, but the New Testament condones slavery. There is not the faintest suggestion there that the present absolute duty of Christian slave-owners is to free their slaves. Nor can it be pleaded that in kind the slavery of the first century was less a socially degrading thing than the slavery of the American or West Indian plantations. But Jesus Christ's social teaching adapted itself to the state of society in which it arose.

And many centuries had to elapse before there came that view of the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, and the worth of the individual which led to the abolition of slavery in the name of Jesus Christ.

That was plainly a development—a lawful development, a development which everyone now sees to be in accordance with the Spirit of Jesus. But, notice, it has meant an alteration of the social framework of the Christian Gospel. The New Testament writers did not see the question as we see it, and could not.

So we recognize that, in an age when a revolution in social science has taught us the essential solidarity of the race, it is a lawful development of Christianity that we should claim for Jesus Christ supremacy in the social law of classes and nations as well as in the spiritual law of the individual soul. We believe it is right to bring Jesus Christ into relationship with the social question, and we have faith to see that all social problems find their solution in a recognition of, and a gradual permeation by, His Spirit, although, in strictest truth, the New Testament does not deal with the social problems of the first century—the relations of capital and labour, for instance—such as we claim that Christianity must deal with to-day.

Then there is some common ground on which the Modernist and the Evangelical—for whom the Bible is the Word of God—may meet ; viz., the belief in the action of the Eternal Spirit of God in altering the colour and the proportions of the framework in which the precious picture of the Life of God in Jesus Christ has come down to us. As far as that framework is concerned, we may believe, with the Modernist, that God meets the age where it is, especially because we also believe that in the development of physical or of social science through the ages the action of the Divine Spirit can be found.

But we differ *toto cælo* from the Modernist because we think that this development applies only to the framework, but that the essentials of the Bible presentation of God's revelation—the Fatherhood of God, the Historic Life of Jesus Christ, the



Incarnation, the Atonement, the Ministry of the Spirit—are objective realities, permanent and eternal.

We do not, cannot—were fools to believe that the Bible presentation of Jesus Christ is like the infant's swaddling clothes, which are dropped with the very beginnings of growth. We maintain, on the other hand, that we are not working outwards from that revelation, so as to cast it off like a slough; but that all lawful development works around it, sometimes one age regaining the ground which the last has lost, sometimes occupying for the first time one of its good and large lands untilled hitherto, but always finding that there, in the Bible-revelation still only partially appreciated, is the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

We recognize that it is the only line for the Roman apologist, who wants to gloze over, or to find normal development in, all the many puerilities of his creed, and the false and even contrary deductions which it has made in dogma from its assumed premises, to say that "the Catholic Church has no more need to be identical with the religion of Jesus than a man has need to preserve at fifty the proportions, features, and manner of life of the day of his birth in order to be the same individual." But we do not believe that the Jesus of the Gospels is but the starting-point of revelation. He is not merely revelation's cradle; He is its school, its college, its home, its rest. And He is found, in actual historic fact, only in the pages of the New Testament. And therefore for us, because the historic Jesus of Nazareth of whom alone it speaks, and to whom it testifies, is also the eternal Divine Christ, the Bible must be the touchstone for any development of faith which shows itself as the ages run, and such development must be appraised as Christian or condemned as contrary to the spirit of Christianity just as it is found or not found there.

