

## Theological Reorientation.

WHAT will be the effect of the war upon religion and upon theology? What developments may we expect to see when once again men and women turn to the ordinary avocations of civil life? What tendencies of thought will reveal themselves, what desires will be urgent to find expression in religious practices and devotional forms? It is to such questions as these that I would try to give some kind of an answer, for I am sure that in this matter, as in many others, we must be awake to the possibilities of the future—always ready to understand, to sympathize whenever we can, to condemn only under the pressure of loyalty to the deeper truth. And if the observer wishes not merely to recognize the signs of the times, but also to help others to sift and choose among them (for not every sign, though its blaze fill the heavens, is a beacon of hope), he must always remember how far greater than all human interpretation is the revelation which God gives, that no measuring-rod has been granted to him, whereby he may trace out the boundaries of the things of God, and confine their growth and power within limitations that his own "Thus far and no farther" sets up.

### I.

I would speak first of the Christian truth as expressed in the Church's doctrine and theology. Will not the importance of true thought, especially in relation to the great problem of the meaning and value of life, be more widely admitted? Not to admit it, or to put it on one side in an off-hand way as a matter of no real urgency, would mean utter blindness on our part to one of the great predisposing causes of the war, to one of the facts that have been its continual accompaniment. Let me quote from a pamphlet which has come into my hands words which will illustrate my meaning and point their own most grave moral. The writer, a Prussian by birth, but for many years a naturalized British subject, declares that "those who come into close contact with the people of Protestant Prussia, and whose knowledge of the German language enables them to get some glimpse of their real inner life and thought, are confronted with a philosophy of life which is perhaps the crassest

and the most destructive form of materialism which the world has ever known, and which the mind can possibly conceive. It expresses itself in an almost complete absence of all transcendental ideals, and in entire disregard of those moral and spiritual laws and obligations which would seem to be inherent in our nature, and upon the obedience to which the healthy development of a nation's life ultimately depends. Later, he points out that the pagan development which has taken place in German national life could never have occurred "had not the truths of religion completely lost their hold upon the individual as well as upon the nation."

Let us mark those words: "the truths of religion." Not religion simply as an emotion, as a particular kind of experience, but religion as involving beliefs about the character of the world and the meaning of life, involving, at least, those beliefs in a personal God, in the spirituality of the human soul, and a future life, which the author can regard as no longer existent in the public opinion of modern Protestant Germany. Surely we shall not fail to learn our lesson here, shall not fail to recognize as at least a stupid thing the easy sneer at dogma. A dogma may be denied, but to treat as unimportant, as valueless for life and unworthy of attention, the great and venerable dogmas of the Church is sheer mental and spiritual opaqueness. What are those dogmas?—That God is our Father, that He cared so much for men, His children, that He gave His only Son (He was never a lonely God: before He was Father of the world, before He was Father of men, He was the eternal Father of the eternal Son), gave Him to take human nature and even to die for men, that this Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, rose again from the dead, and that through Him there descends from the Father upon men sick with many ills, and especially upon the Holy Church, of which Christ is the Head, the Holy Spirit Himself eternal with the Father and the Son, to bless human life through the sacraments of Jesus, and enrich it with supernatural grace. To disregard such things, as though they could be in no sort of touch with ordinary life, is a mark of that impatience and even contempt for anything except material goods, which, if produced far enough, and on a large enough scale, forebodes such a national perversion as the author I have referred to draws for our amazement, and such a national disaster as we even now see in its beginnings; and as more and more the veil of the future is being withdrawn, we catch glimpses of the approach-

ing ruin of a great nation that once feared God but turned from Him to serve idols—and to serve them all in vain.

Is there any one point in Christian doctrine which we may hope that the war will throw into a strong light? There is such a point, I believe,—too much neglected in past years, though indeed it is no point on the circumference, but the very centre of the circle of Christian doctrine. The Cross with its message of redemption should, for Christians, be right in the centre of their thought of God, for the Cross is not only a mighty appeal to the feelings, nor only the greatest of examples to stimulate the will,—it is the teacher to men of God's mode of action, of the way He chooses for the salvation of men, the way of weakness, of suffering, of apparent, most apparent, failure. And the challenge of the war to the troubled mind and the breaking heart is—can these horrors, this ghastly suffering, this appalling waste of young life, cohere with any doctrine of God at all with any belief that the world means intensely and means well? I think that this question would be even more perplexing than it is were it the central doctrine of the Church that God is the kindly, sometimes almost the genial, Father. But in the gloom of the Cross we trace another message: what seemed the greatest, most miserable waste of the most heroic young life (He was only 33) was God's method of redemption, His richest gift and His profoundest teaching. In the darkness of to-day's world, the gross darkness which covers the peoples and lies, one heavy pall, upon men and women from end to end of a suffering continent, there is hope in the concentrated, supernatural darkness of the Cross. How can we justify God before the present world? Only by recovering the Cross and its Gospel of a suffering God. If God is in Christ dying for men, then God cares. He stands above the battlefield now; but He once descended on to it and died there. Christ's obedience passed through suffering to final victory. Obedient to the call of country, millions have given themselves to-day, many of them to meet the last enemy, death, by him to be slain. Is there for them no final victory? Let those who doubt remember how others doubted when on Calvary everything was finished. Yet it was not finished as they thought, and as they were to learn. It is the same lesson that we all have to learn, to be forced back upon it, to repeat it boldly because in it alone do the world's mysteries and tragedies find a key—Christ died for our sins, He rose again the third day, He is alive for evermore.

## II.

Let me pass from the more theological to the more ecclesiastical side of my subject. What forces may we expect to see at work in the Church of England, what changes to be promoted by their interplay and their conflicts? There are two which, I have little doubt, will prove strong, and even turbulent. When I speak of them as Catholicism and Interdenominationalism, I hope that my meaning is plain, even if the terms used are open to objection. Both forces will have gained in power from the long stay of our Army in France, from the close association of Englishmen of every kind of religious conviction and denominational attachment in the face of extreme danger, and from the goodwill and mutual respect created among the army chaplains. Thus I think it almost certain that the bitterness of the old suspicions and prejudices which blazed up in the so-called crisis in the Church of the beginning of this century will become more and more feeble, except in some isolated and not very influential circles. A strong desire will be felt, even a determination, that the religious practices and devotions of the Church of England shall not necessarily be confined within the four corners of the existing Book of Common Prayer. There are things which may not be liked, which ecclesiastical authority may not like, but which, only at great peril, will, in the future, be simply forbidden in the Church of England. There will be a good deal of religious and devotional experimentation which may often be dangerous, sometimes quite undesirable, but which will either have to be allowed and, as far as possible, controlled—or prohibited, with no results except the increase of anarchy and the absence of all restraint. Let me refer to two of the practices most disliked by moderate Churchmen, which will need the most careful handling, practices that must be observed at work before any scientific and final judgment can, in my opinion, be passed upon them. The first is the Invocation of Saints, the second is the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament for the purposes of devotion. To condemn such practices out of hand as superstitious and unedifying seems to me both unscientific and arrogant: unscientific as being a rash judgment in advance of the collective experience available as to the value of such practices, experience which deserves to be carefully noted and sifted—arrogant as implying that, in respect of its sixteenth cen-

ture opinions on these subjects, the Church of England has said the last word and has nothing to learn. And of this I am very sure—belief in the supernatural, and in its relationship to human life, is not so strong in modern England that we can afford to return nothing but a harsh and unsympathetic negative to those who wish in their devotions to realize and assert the fact that the other world is populated, even as ours is, by holy and helpful personal forces; those who, believing with all their hearts the truth of the Christmas message, Emmanuel—God with us—would worship and pray in the presence of what they believe to be a special manifestation of His abiding with His people. That such practices involve, as the condition of their possibility, a united congregation, that they should be carefully regulated and controlled, goes, I imagine, without saying, but control is one thing, and prohibition another. In so far as there is self-will, individualism and even anarchy in the Church to-day, it is largely due to the many years during which the latter policy was adopted. Even to-day one catches a murmur now and then of a threat that the time will come when within the Church of England the letter of the law—as some account law—will prevail. Such threats are useless, and even were they successful, would have as their one result the disruption of the Church and her overthrow as the religious representative of the nation. Is it too much to hope that after the war there will be a change in our whole point of view as to policy? The method of suppression, even were it desirable, is not feasible, as the campaigners of fifteen years ago for the suppression of the Mass and the Confessional—(in some such terms the catch-phrase ran)—were to discover, though both in the Press and in Parliament they had powerful backing.

But if there is to be a tendency in the direction of a freer use of Catholic devotion, there will also be one in the direction of interdenominational unity, towards the breaking down of barriers and a readier intercourse with Nonconformists. It is possible, though not, I think, very likely, that Kikuyus will be multiplied at home. But as we may expect a settlement of this whole question, a settlement which may not please any body of opinion to any very great extent, but may work tolerably well in practice, when the next Lambeth Conference meets, speculation is not very profitable. But this I would say: the whole question of our future relationship with Nonconformity must be very greatly affected by the success of

the suggestions of the new President of the Free Church Council for the creation of a United Free Church of England, and by the lines, doctrinal and ecclesiastical, along which such an experiment proceeds. In a brilliant sermon at the recent Bradford Free Church Congress, Dr. W. E. Orchard, of the King's Weigh House, pleaded for what one may broadly call the enrichment of the Free Church Life by the restoration of certain Catholic elements and ideals, priesthood, sacramentalism and the like, but without what he considers the narrowing interpretation of these ideals, of which older Churches have been guilty. How such elements can find a place within English Nonconformity is hardly for an outsider to say. But if Christian union at home is to be brought nearer in the future—and union may be interpreted, as by Bishop Chandler, of Bloemfontein, writing in the *Constructive Quarterly*, as “the fusion of different elements into a single whole,” and contrasted with the federation which, as the same theologian says, does but “perpetuate and stereotype” our divisions—it will, I believe, be through such a sympathetic inclination on the part of Nonconformists towards the historic Catholic element in Christianity as will lead them to accept, not episcopal control—except in the broadest and most formal way possible—nor episcopal ordination of all their ministers, but the episcopal ordination of those ministers to whom their own congresses, unions, or synods entrust the administration of the sacraments. Any such concession would, I believe, be met from the Church's side by a frank willingness on the part of all for whom the Church is primarily not a political but a spiritual institution, to open up the whole question of establishment and endowment, and to recognize without reservation the special message of Nonconformity (to use a title that would then be out of place) and the rightfulness of its special characteristics. But I am well aware that all this, even if such lines of progress seem at all desirable, will be in advance of the times for very many years to come.

### III.

I have touched on only a few points in this great subject. Of much which is by no means of second-rate importance I have said nothing, in particular of the question—may we expect a powerful demand for a freer interpretation of the historic creeds, for such a revision of theology as the Roman Catholic Modernists attempted

to secure? Such a demand will certainly be made, and even now meets with support which, though limited in extent, is often of high intellectual quality and indubitable moral sincerity. If a real inner breaking-point is to be reached in the Church of England, it may be on this issue. But our whole thought on this matter is still in its early stages; it will not, I think, fall to this generation or even to the next to give anything of the nature of a formal decision.

In conclusion, let us not be pessimistic. Clearer and clearer it seems to me to become that in the future, and the further into the future we gaze, the choice must be, in Western civilization and ultimately all over the world, between the Christian religion and no religion at all, between Christian truth and no truth that man can ever grasp and know. I do not rule out the possibility that the alternative which mankind in the future will choose will be the alternative that to us must seem utterly gloomy, and dooming to atrophy man's noblest powers. But in the Gospels I read a nobler hope, the hope of a good time coming, of the best time that humanity has known or could know, while this earth and age remain and God's eternity still tarries, a time when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

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