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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE CHURCH AND THE PROPHETS.

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A paper read before the Norwich Diocesan Branch of the Central Society for Sacred Study. January 8th, 1934.

THE two elements in the religious life of mankind presented by these words may be sharply contrasted, or combined in a higher synthesis. In the tremendous rebuke, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee," we have the contrast; in the tender lament which follows, "How often would I have gathered thy children together!", we have the possibility of the synthesis proclaimed.

The prophetic element is awakening, often startling, sometimes shattering, and ultimately creative: the ecclesiastical is conservative, traditional, organising, and tending sometimes to immobility and lack of spiritual life: yet both are necessary.

The history of Israel reveals the essential quality and the interrelation of the two elements with far greater distinctness than does the history of the Christian Church. Perhaps the earlier religions share also in this characteristic. In Egypt Akenaton was certainly a prophet in the true sense. His work was opposed and destroyed by the power of the priesthood. In Persia, Zoroaster was a great prophet, and succeeded in capturing the credence of his people until a fiercer prophet arose in the person of Mohammed and swept them into the vast whirlpool of the Moslem faith.

In Israel, prophecy reached its purest, highest, noblest and most enduring attainment. The vision of God came to man in the manner which has kindled faith and hope in souls capable of discerning it throughout all ages ever since.

Amos, the shepherd of Tekoa, stirred by the luxury and oppression in Israel, and filled with the sense of God, His unity, His greatness, His righteousness, proclaimed the doom of those who break the Divine Law, no matter how they may offer worship to God. He knew that it was the call of God which sent him forth on his mission. When Amaziah, the Priest of Bethel, commanded him to return to his own country of Judah, and prophesy no more in the King of Israel's sanctuary, the prophet's reply was, "I was no prophet; neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees; and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel."

These words prove the nature of the call which sent forth the man to the work of his life. It was the clear conviction in his own soul as to the holiness of God, and the needs of the people of Israel, and also the intense realisation that the man to whom this revelation had been granted must surely be God's appointed messenger to His people.

Amos may stand as the representative of those souls who, all down the centuries, have seen the vision of God, and heard His call ; and, apart from the church order of their time, have gone forth with a message from Him to stir the hearts of men to fresh faith and to spiritual renewal.

Next to Amos I place the great prophet Isaiah. Here again the nature of the call which sent the prophet forth upon his mission is clearly declared. He was worshipping in the temple, and was, it would seem, at the threshold, that is, at the entrance to the sacred building. A sense of sin was upon him, and, it may be, he did not venture to go further. Then was granted the vision of God. He says : " I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." That is, the robe of the Divine figure, flowing downwards, spread out over the floor of the temple. With this imagery, I would compare the cry of the Seraphim, " the whole earth is full of His glory," or, as it is literally, " the fulness of the whole earth is His glory." As the mighty robe covered the floor, so does the universe in all its fulness manifest His glory.

Poised above it were the Seraphim, each with six wings, two veiling the face, two hiding the feet, and the other two supporting the figure. And, with alternate cry they uttered the ascription : " Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts. The fulness of the whole earth is His glory." And, beneath him, Isaiah felt the foundations of the threshold shaken at the voice that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

So far the man's attention had been occupied with the details of the vision. Then, with sudden realisation, his thoughts turned in upon himself. He was unclean, unfit for that holy presence. " Woe is me," he cried, " for I am undone ; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips ; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Stricken through by the consciousness of his sin, he felt himself unfit for that holy presence. It condemned him utterly. Conviction of sin was the first result of the vision of God. But sincere confession brought the message of forgiveness, " Then flew one of the Seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar ; and he touched my mouth with it, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips, and thine iniquity is taken away and thy sin is purged." It was pardon freely given to the penitent soul.

Then was heard the voice of the Lord saying, " Whom shall I send, and Who will go for us ? " and quickly came the answer, " Here am I, send me." In recording this vision, the prophet affirms his commission. It came directly from God, conveyed by a special experience. Isaiah most clearly shows that, by a revelation, God had singled him out, and set him on the work of his life. He was not the agent of the ecclesiastical system. He was a man to whom had been granted a vision of God which had sent him forth.

These two instances are surely characteristic of the prophets of Israel. And, let it not be forgotten that the great prophets of

Israel were supremely the teachers of the human race in the things of God, and in preparation for the coming of Christ.

When we turn to the New Testament we find something very similar. John the Baptist was not the accredited agent of the Jewish Church. It is quite clear that the authorities did not make up their minds as to his mission. They did not accept him. It was of his work, and their failure to recognise it, that our Lord said, when challenged by the Chief Priests and elders, "I also will ask you one question which, if ye tell me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things, The baptism of John, whence was it? From heaven or from men? And they reasoned with themselves saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why then did ye not believe him? But if we shall say, From men; we fear the multitude, for all hold John as a prophet. And they answered Jesus and said, We know not. He also said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things." And, arising out of this came the solemn words, "Verily I say unto you that the publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not; but the publicans and the harlots believed him, and ye, when ye saw it, did not even repent yourselves afterwards that ye might believe him."

John the Baptist was the forerunner of the Lord, and the prophetic character which marked his ministry was certainly preparatory in relation to the ministry of Christ. This is clear in every reference. That Christ our Lord was Prophet in the highest sense of the word is a commonplace of the traditional interpretation of the Gospel account of His life and labours. With Him also we find that the Jewish Church showed its wonted hostility to a prophetic ministry. Nor did our Lord fail to show to them the terrible nature of their fault. "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and garnish the tombs of the righteous, and say, if we had been in the days of our fathers, we should not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye witness to yourselves that ye are sons of them that slew the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers!" And this tremendous utterance ends with the appeal and lamentation, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!"

This great passage and many others express the certain fact that the official Church set itself in definite opposition to the prophetic ministry of Jesus, a fact which is manifested in its full awfulness in the betrayal, condemnation and death of our Blessed Lord. This fatal opposition of the Church of the time to the greatest of all prophetic ministries, this failure, through official blindness, to discern the spiritual glory of the Lord, stands as a warning to all the ages.

This tremendous revelation of the fatal effects of the blindness

to spiritual reality which results from a privileged official rule regarding itself as the sole representative of the Divine authority, stands as a great warning. Like the men of old, it is quite easy for us to-day to say to ourselves, in effect if not in words, "If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets."

Here is also a demonstration that it is not God's way to confine the agency of His quickening Spirit to any one system or company of men, no matter how influential and authoritative it may seem to be. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth, so is every one that is born of the Spirit." In history, one tremendous tragedy of the spiritual world after another can be traced to forgetfulness of this truth. When, as at times in the history of the Christian Church, we see earthly ambition or greed seizing the machinery of administration, we are shocked to find that power was used to put down movements towards reformation, and to destroy genuine spiritual effort. Think, for example, of Pope Alexander VI, the monstrous Borgia, burning alive Savonarola, who, whatever errors of judgment he may have fallen into, was a sincere and whole-hearted servant of God and a witness, in that dark age, to holiness of life.

When we follow the stream of time as it flows through the centuries of Christian history, we find that, at epoch after epoch, prophetic teachers arose, moved by the call of God, and kindling, for their own ages, afresh, the sacred fire of the Spirit in human hearts.

Such was John, known to the world as St. Francis of Assisi. The name Francis was given to him in his youth, it is said, because of the French gaiety of spirit which always animated him. This joyous quality of soul remained with him to the end. Turning aside from worldly prospects by no means despicable, he renounced all worldly ambitions, embraced a life of poverty, and went forth as a witness to the power of Christ to change human nature, and to give an unfailling spring of spiritual power and gladness independently of all material conditions. That witness of his has never lost its power, even among those who do not follow his ways. Francis had the wisdom, unusual among prophetic souls, of coming to terms with the highest authority of the Church in his time. He had indeed the rare opportunity of having to deal with the strongest and most clear-sighted of all the medieval Popes. Innocent III, under whom the papacy attained its greatest power and prestige, while always insisting on the supreme authority of the Roman See, was a man of great wisdom and breadth of vision. To Francis he first gave a verbal approval—no doubt it was a test—and then, at a later time, an official recognition which was of immeasurable advantage to the movement. Would that the authorities of other times had shown equal wisdom!

Martin Luther was certainly one of the mightiest prophets of all time. Son of a working miner, he had yet from his youth the deep

sense of spiritual values, which enabled him to become a man of learning, a thinker, and a mystic. Going to Rome, he was deeply disappointed, finding there a spirit of worldliness and even unbelief. It was indeed an awful time. The succession of the Roman Pontiffs of that age—Sixtus IV, Innocent VIII, Alexander VI, Julius II, Leo X—stands alone in history. Except for the debased period of the tenth century, when there was neither learning nor morality, there is no such record of infamy. Three out of the five popes I have named were monsters of iniquity. Of the other two, Julius was a great prince and a cruel soldier, with no claim to spiritual religion, Leo was a brilliant pagan. As the visitor to Rome watches the penitents ascending the Santa Scala on their knees, thought goes back to Luther, who, tradition reports, seemed to hear, as he was making the same penance, a voice which said: "The just shall live by faith." That, some think, was the true turning-point of his life. The career of Luther, with its strange lights and shadows, is one of the most wonderful in the history of human souls. However we may criticise some of his actions, we feel, as we read and think of him, that he was indeed a prophet, one of the mightiest the world has seen. His influence survives to-day, not only in Germany, but in the great churches of the Scandinavian lands.

The Reformation period turns our thoughts also to Calvin and Zwingli. The former certainly a theologian of great and penetrating insight, as we must admit, no matter how we may dissent from some of his conclusions; the latter an influence of more moderating spirit.

These great prophets of the Reformation, while their actions divided the Church, certainly were the saviours of it, in the providence of God. For it was from them that the Church of Rome itself received that tremendous shock which produced the counter-reformation.

The Anglican Church has also had its prophets. Wicliffe, the forerunner of the Reformation, a school-man and yet a great spiritual force. To him, very largely, the Church of England owes its less theoretical and more biblical character. And since the Reformation, England has been the scene of very notable movements of a distinctly prophetic nature. George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, who set out, Bible in hand, inveighing against formalism and conventionality in religion, practising the simple life, showing his advocacy of primitive simplicity in curious ways which excited the ridicule of the world, yet full of love to mankind, and inspiring many of those beneficent and charitable movements which have marked the religious life of the modern world.

Above all in the later history of English religion must be set John Wesley. In him met influences derived from the old High Anglican tradition and also from the more revolutionary genius of European reformers. It was the reading of Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans which brought about in him that vivid sense of the pardoning love of God which sent him forth on his mission. A new power manifested itself, which swept aside ecclesiastical

traditions. The churches were closed to him. Open-air meetings became the rule. For half a century he proclaimed the Gospel of Christ to vast multitudes. Sometimes 20,000 people would wait patiently to hear him. He travelled 250,000 miles, usually on horseback, and preached 40,000 sermons. He wrote books to instruct his itinerant preachers. His literary industry was prodigious. The profits from the sale of his works amounted to £30,000, all of which he gave away in charity. Moreover, unlike many intense minds, he had a wonderful breadth of view. He held that the heathen, if they feared God and used the light they had, would be saved. He hoped to meet Marcus Aurelius in heaven. As to the setting up of a separate church organisation, he hated the very thought of it.

Since Wesley's time there have been many prophetic movements affecting the life of the Anglican Church: the Evangelical movement, the Oxford movement, the mission of Moody and Sankey, in which American methods were combined with the spirit of the Wesleyan tradition; the Anglican Mission movement, of which Canon Aitken was the most outstanding personality; the Salvation Army, which united its evangelical fervour with a mission for the saving of the miserable, the socially depressed; and the Church Army, which has proved a very valuable auxiliary to the Church in reaching those of our people who have drifted away from the regular ministrations of religion. And now has come the Group Movement, as it is called, which begins at the other end of the social scale.

All these partake of the character which I venture to describe as *prophetic*. None of them sprang from spiritual sources which are of the recognised order of the Church. Every one of them was marked by the activity of men of great spiritual insight and courage, men who did not wait to be called and sent by the regular ministerial organisation of the Church. In relation to every one of them, it will be found that such recognition as they received was given with hesitation, and often with unwillingness. Yet from them there has flowed into the Church a stream of new life and a renewal of religious faith.

Summing up then all the evidence of history, it would seem that the words of our Lord against Jerusalem, "Thou that killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee," stand as a warning for every age. Yet, let us pause and consider. We cling to our accustomed ways. We resent revolutionary movements. We do not like to see the institutions under which we have grown up attacked, and their imperfections exposed. We love the settled order, the recognised authority. This conservative attitude of mind is one of the great safeguards of ordered life. In our religious life, it is specially valuable and important. It makes for that good and settled tradition which keeps human life within the bounds of sanity, which teaches reverence and secures stability. And there are no more important elements than these—*reverence* and *stability*.

In our life as Churchmen and Christians, these things are of immeasurable importance.

How then can we keep the Order of the Church and yet not lose the inspiration of the prophets? The answer is not easy.

Perhaps I may remind you of the words in which Canon Streeter sums up his investigation of the state of things in the Primitive Church. He writes: "Whatever else is disputable, there is, I submit, one result from which there is no escape. In the Primitive Church there was no single system of Church Order laid down by the Apostles. During the first hundred years of Christianity, the Church was an organism alive and growing—changing its organisation to meet changing needs." "Uniformity was a later development." "The first Christians achieved what they did, because the spirit with which they were inspired was one favourable to experiment." "It may be that the line of advance for the Church to-day is, not to imitate the forms, but to recapture the spirit of the Primitive Church."

Yes. Let us try to recapture the spirit of the Primitive Church. If we can do that we shall go a very long way towards overcoming the opposition of the organised Church to the prophetic ministries which spring up from time to time. The ministry of the prophet was a recognised element in the religious life of the earliest Christian age.

And this, I think, may be said for the Anglican Church, even in the past, and still more in our own time. She does not kill the prophets, she criticises them: she holds aloof: she observes them. And then, in time, when this stage is passed, she finds something to learn from them. This is certainly true of the ministry of John Wesley, of the Evangelical Revival, of the Oxford movement. Perhaps, if I may venture to suggest it, she may even learn something from the Modernist movement, from Karl Barth, and from the Groups.

May God help us to hear His voice however it may speak to us!

SCIENCE, RELIGION AND MAN. By the Rev. W. J. J. Cornelius, D. Litt. Pp. 387. *Williams & Norgate, Ltd.* 15s. net.

In the midst of his work as vicar of a busy town parish, Dr. Cornelius has found time to write a book of considerable size which he offers to those who, for various reasons, are unable to study deeply the problems of origins and developments as they affect human life. He writes as one convinced that certain concepts must be accepted by the Churches. There is law and order throughout the universe: evolution is the process by which life advances: by slow development and selection progress is made from rudimentary life to the complex, from brute to man; man is not the result of a Divine arbitrary fiat and instantaneous action. On the other hand he pleads that the Bible does not contradict acknowledged scientific data and that, tested by the sciences, there is evidence of super-human knowledge and wisdom.

On the whole, Dr. Cornelius has done well the task he proposed.

F. B.