

## THE FUTURE LIFE AS VIEWED TO-DAY.<sup>1</sup>

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“I came that they may have life.”—St. John x. 10.

**D**O we believe in a life after death? If so, what does the belief mean to us? Is there a general belief in a future life? If so, what effect does it have on conduct? These questions are not very easy to answer. Formerly everyone—every professing Christian at any rate—believed in a hereafter, with the alternatives of heaven and hell, though heaven and hell were conceived in more or less materialistic terms. Heaven was a state of unending happiness in delectable surroundings, such as those portrayed in Martin’s pictures, and hell was a place of unending torture of a quasi-physical kind. These ideas—of hell particularly—were derived partly from paganism and partly from a misreading of Scripture, especially in the Apocalypse. It is better understood now that the Apocalypse, written in a time of severe persecution, and so laying special stress on the “last things,” is largely symbolical. When rightly interpreted, this portion of Holy Scripture is as profitable for doctrine as ever, but it is recognised now that the most matured teaching of the Bible on the life to come is to be found in the Gospel and Epistles of St. John.

There are some who will remember when there was a wide recoil from the old doctrine of hell with its endless flames. There was a doubt in many minds whether such a doctrine could be reconciled with the character of God as a God of Justice and Mercy. Evidently the popular view needed to be corrected and even the doctrine taught in high places. An advance of teaching was required, and, as is customary, those who were pioneers of the advance had to suffer for it.

One of these was Frederick Denison Maurice. He was Professor of Divinity in King’s College, London, and in 1853 published a volume of *Theological Essays* in which he dealt with the difficulties which hinder the acceptance of faith in Christ. Amongst other things he said that “eternal life” and “eternal death” as spoken of by Christ had been seriously misunderstood, and that the word “eternal” had not precisely the same meaning as “everlasting,” and was used by Christ primarily to denote a quality of life rather than the mere duration of life.

The general teaching in these essays was not approved by the authorities of King’s College, and they deprived Maurice of his professorship. The students at the College took a different view. They made it plain that the Professor had a message which commended itself to the younger generation, at any rate, and when

<sup>1</sup> The transcript of a sermon preached in substance in Chester Cathedral.

Maurice left they gave him a handsome present of books. These books descended to Maurice's grandson, Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice, who is known to us in Chester, and General Maurice told me not long ago that he offered the books to the present authorities of King's College, London, and that they accepted them gladly.

Later than this, within living memory, Archdeacon Farrar, as he was then, attracted much attention by a series of sermons on the life to come, which were afterwards published under the title of *Eternal Hope*. The book had a wide sale and is still in circulation, but it is probably unknown to many of the present generation, and, learned and eloquent though it be, would hardly be looked upon in any quarter now as saying the last word on the difficult questions with which it deals.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever have been the causes of the change, the old crude and materialistic view of the hereafter has gone, and it is difficult to say what is now commonly believed. Perhaps there is a vague general notion of retribution and of happiness in a future life, but it is probable that this does not largely influence conduct. The thought of a life to come is crowded out of the minds of many by their interest in their material surroundings and by a preoccupation with the things of the passing hour.

The test of the belief or disbelief comes in the crises of life. An ominous thing in these days is the comparative frequency of suicide. Every now and then we are startled and shocked by hearing of some person, holding perhaps an honoured position, who has put an end to his own life. We are shocked because we take it as showing that, such as the man was, conforming perhaps to the ordinary usages of religion, his religious faith was lacking in the power to sustain him in adversity. Suicide, we are told, is much more common among men than among women, more common among cultured than uncultured people, and among townfolk than those living in the country. To take one's own life is a crime in the eye of the law, to be prevented whenever possible; any attempt at suicide, if unsuccessful, being punishable. Formerly, when suicide occurred, a special punishment was inflicted on the body, which was to be buried at a cross-road with a stake driven through it. This barbarous statute was repealed as late as 1823.

It is to be remarked that the State takes the same view of suicide as the Church. Our Service for the Burial of the Dead may not be read over persons who have laid violent hands on themselves. There are certain phrases in the service which render it entirely inappropriate in such cases; for instance, in the form of "committal"—"It hath pleased Almighty God of His great Mercy to take unto Himself the Soul of our dear brother here departed." A usual thing now at an inquest is for the suggestion or suspicion of criminality to be removed by a verdict that the person who took his own life did so while of "unsound mind." It is a merciful and charitable usage, intended perhaps primarily to remove the impression that no

<sup>1</sup> There is some cautious language on this whole subject in the chapter on "The Life Eternal" in Bishop Westcott's *The Historic Faith*.

sort of religious service would be proper when in such a case the body is committed to the ground. It is a just pronouncement in probably many cases, because extreme trouble or great physical infirmity may unhinge the faculties and sap the power of self-control. It is significant too of the tacit judgment of those who deliver such a verdict as on behalf of the State, that only those of "unsound mind" could commit the failure of duty, as Socrates deemed it, of laying down the trust of life except at the bidding of Him who gave it.

It is argued at times, and may be at the back of the minds occasionally of devout Christians, that in cases of incurable disease involving prolonged torture, there is justification for ending the torture when the prolongation of life can do no good to the sufferer and can only cause distress to those who minister to him. There is much—very much—however to be taken into account on the other side. God has wonderful ways of producing good out of evil. Even in a case of extreme pain there may be a process of soul-purification going on rapidly as a direct result of the "affliction," which is "but for a moment," as St. Paul viewed it. Not a few who have had the privilege of ministering to the sick have noted this pronounced and rapid advance in faith and patience, and the Apostolic saying has thus been illustrated to them that "the more the outward man decayeth the more the inward man is renewed day by day." Who can estimate too the moral and spiritual benefit to watchers by the sick as they exercise the Divine compassion and helpfulness to which they are called? The strain is great, no doubt, but so is the compensation. "Souls grow white as well as faces in these holy ministries."

The other test of faith comes when friends are taken from this world. Sometimes there is rebellion and the refusal to be consoled, with its clouding effect upon the life. In numerous cases, however, there is wonderful resignation in times of bereavement, and Christian hope is exercised almost as a matter of course. By some indeed the temptation is felt to resort to those who hold out the promise of communication with the departed by the methods of what is called Spiritualism. This is represented in such quarters as something advanced and novel, towards which all should be moving. As a matter of fact, however, it is a reactionary movement. It is the old necromancy—enquiry of the dead—formerly a common heathen practice, condemned in several passages of the Old Testament. We have cause to be gentle in our judgment, as God would be, of those who in the stress of great grief are moved to try to learn thus what is the present condition of those they loved. The Church, however, must teach expressly and firmly that God's children may not seek knowledge of the unseen apart from Him and by means which He has not authorised.

All this throws us back more and more on Christ as the very Word of God, the Speech of God to us on the things that are really needful to the settlement of faith. When we turn to Christ we find that the life to come is central in His teaching and impregnates the whole of it. It is always assumed as a fact and is always associated with the thought of God. So it is with us

when we think rightly about God. We see that belief in God and belief in a future life for man go inseparably together. God being what He is, the Infinite Wisdom, Power, and Love, it is inconceivable to us that He could have made man, with such possibilities of development morally and spiritually, unless He had intended him to survive the life on earth, so limited as it is at the best. We cannot indeed affirm that man is naturally immortal : all we can say, judging from his higher capabilities, is that he is potentially immortal. And with the Christian revelation before us we can see how that potentiality may be made actual in Christ. Christ Himself represented that as the object of His mission : " I came that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."

Christ had not much to say about modes of existence in another state of being. He discouraged speculation and questioning on this and similar matters which are beyond us now. If He was asked, " How can this man give us his flesh to eat ? " he swept aside the irrelevant and emphasised the essential thing by saying, " Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you." Similarly, to the question, " Are there few that be saved ? " His reply to the enquirers would be, " Strive to enter in at the strait gate."

Christ indeed did utter some very grave and even terrible warnings about retribution and possibility of loss in a life to come, to the extent of what St. Paul spoke of as " eternal destruction from the presence of God." But in our thought of the hereafter He would have us concentrate on the vital necessity of our entering into the closest fellowship with God, especially as mediated in Him. " Believe in God," He would say ; " make good your faith in God by the constant endeavour to grow into His likeness ; believe also in Me, in whom you see the Father ; imitate Me ; learn of Me ; become one with Me in spirit and life ; take from Me personally and directly the life which I came to give, and then it will become veritably yours, your hold on it will be assured, you will foretaste it."

There are qualities in the life eternal which cannot be perceived, and felicities which cannot be appreciated, in the life of sense. " Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him. But God hath revealed them unto us by the Spirit." It comes of our spiritual fellowship with God. " This is life eternal, that they should know Thee the only true God, and Him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ." Such knowledge leads to sameness of nature, so that we may see things which God sees, and even possess things, as by prospective right, which God possesses, entering with ever deepening and enlarging views into the treasures of the true and good and beautiful as existing in God ; " for if children, we are then heirs, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ : if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified with Him." For thus through Him and in Him we learn the law of life through death.

Here then is the final answer to all enquiry, the final check to all undue speculation about the future for others and for ourselves. We are to trust God.

Are our friends taken from us? The response of faith must be :

" I know not where His islands lift  
 Their fronded palms in air :  
 I only know they cannot drift  
 Beyond His love and care."

And for ourselves there must be no agitation of the soul about what the life beyond may have in store for us. Any such agitation will die down as we deepen our fellowship with God, and look at all things from the standpoint of our vital union with Him. It will be sufficient for us to be " persuaded " with St. Paul that " neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

OXFORD AND THE GROUPS. Edited by R. H. Crossman. Pp. 208.  
*Basil Blackwell.* 5s. net.

THE MEANING OF THE GROUPS. Edited by F. A. M. Spencer, D.D.  
 Pp. 170. *Methuen & Co.* 5s. net.

As far as literature is concerned, the Oxford Groups are well to the front. Few movements can have produced in so short a time such a wealth of writing.

For those who would know what cultured and devout men and women are thinking about the movement, *Oxford and the Groups* and *The Meaning of the Groups* will afford ample material. The former volume is the product of Oxford. Each writer has an official post in the colleges. With the exception of the Rev. G. Allen, who is a Group leader and writes the first chapter, and Professor Grensted, who is responsible for the final summing up, all the essays are critical, if helpfully so. While recognising the sincerity of purpose and the many achievements of those associated with the Groups, there are many things that the writers either fear or would see altered.

The second book is a symposium to which people of varied types have contributed. Some bless, some condemn. Some see in the Groups abundant hope for the future if the Churches are sufficiently wise : some see positive danger to the religious life of the community. Possibly the best chapter in the book is that by Dr. C. E. Raven, headed " Paul planted, Apollos watered," in which as a friendly critic he pleads for recognition by the Groups that there are other fields and other workers, that there is room both for the passion of the Apostle and for the scholarship of the men of Alexandria.

Both books are well worth reading.

F. B.