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The Way and the Will to Believe

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IN the year 1934 the late Professor James Young Simpson delivered the Sprunt Lectures in the Richmond Theological Seminary, U.S.A. They were afterwards published by Hodder & Stoughton under the apt and luminous title of "The Garment of the Living God." The book's interest for us to-day consists not only in its masterly review of the eternal relationship between Religion and Science, but also for the skilful study of the then militant atheistic Communism in Russia and for the prophecy that it would eventually miscarry and be greatly modified in its scope and character. Dr. Simpson gave three reasons for this change which in the light of the present world situation demand the consideration of every thoughtful Christian.

"In the first place, it rests on a confusion of religion with ecclesiasticism, which is perfectly intelligible to anyone who knew something of the religious life of pre-war Russia. The Church was in reality a tool and prop of the Government. . . . Ecclesiasticism—and by that term may be understood any self-important assumption of authority and functioning in the name of Christ, individual or institutional, from whence the spirit of Christ has largely vanished—has ever been the arch-enemy of God and man. One can understand the attitude of the Bolsheviks to what they have believed to be religion, whereas what they were attacking has been ecclesiasticism and superstition, and the situation carries clear warnings for ourselves.

A second reason why the Bolshevik attitude on these questions cannot be permanent is that the scientific materialism upon which it is based, and of which they have been so sure and proud, is even now passing away before their eyes . . . certain of their ideas on Darwinism as illustrated in their museums, are simply out of date. And this indeed is

true of scientific materialism wherever it is professed . . .

A third reason why the Bolshevik attitude must ultimately fail is that it seems unable to realize the fundamental and determining part that religion—not ecclesiasticism—has played in the development of mankind. The history of man is the story of his religion. . . . In a peculiar way man is aware of his dependence on something other than himself. So constituted, he needs must worship something. When the bones and other musty relics of quondam saints disappear in Russia, the embalmed remains of Lenin take their place. When the ikon and all that it represents passes away, a new idol is substituted in the form of the idealized revolutionary proletariat. Whatever explanation of the need to worship may be given, the actuality is there."

He therefore urges that it is of supreme importance that Christian theologians should both explain the true nature of religion and also give in simple language the reasons for the fundamental part it has played in human, racial and individual development in the past. It must inevitably continue as a vital factor in human life if a high level of civilization is to be maintained. He had no doubt that religion, which has many forms throughout the world, has developed at its best and intensest into that conscious mystical union with Jesus Christ, which is stressed in every Christian Church.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

It is, however, obvious that many people in every section of Christian society are asking (e.g., B.B.C. Any Questions ?) What does the future hold in store for us ? or still more pessimistically, Is there any future at all for Christianity ? It will help us to answer the questions if we look backward for a moment. Every past failure in Christendom has been due to the Church's failure to live on the spiritual plane given to it by her Lord and Master. This is true not only of Russia, but also of England and every other Christian country. In every church and in every age there have been some Christians who, as "living epistles," were read and known by all men, but actual militant progress has depended on the spiritual life of the Church as a whole. Moreover, the biographies of the saints reveal a constant testing of their faith and the need of a constant renewal of their will and purpose.

The spiritual need of the world to-day is greater than ever before in its long history and the time has come when a planned and determined "will to believe" must be emphasized throughout the whole Christian community. The world-wide failure of "ecclesiastical Christianity" is plain. False conceptions of worth and dignity have eaten like a canker into its ideals and weakened its spiritual power over men. What was to establish peace has kindled strife—what was to give men certainty and confidence has provoked doubt and planted mistrust in their minds. This can be plainly illustrated in the correspondence columns of the newspapers in regard to the urgent question of religious instruction in the day schools. In one letter a well-known magistrate after referring to the problem of delinquent youth asks, "Can religious education improve this ugly situation? Not, I suggest, if by religious education is meant primarily the exposition of the difficult dogmas that worried the Christian Church many centuries ago. To-day the challenge, both from our national enemies and from our own youth, is not to the dogmas of theology, but to the ethical standards emphasized in the teaching of Jesus. Only if religious education places foremost the standards of conduct set up by Jesus is youth likely to be changed." Another correspondent pleads for "the teaching of religion as our Lord taught it, free from the trammels of ecclesiasticism." Of course the Christian religion cannot be taught and explained apart from its theology and the controversial issues which have had to be faced, but its simplest elements must come first. That is the reason why the Gospels, which were written after the doctrinal Epistles, are put in the first place in the New Testament.

THE AVERAGE MAN

Most of those with whom we come in contact every day have been brought up in a nominally Christian atmosphere, and that is the background of all our social and public life. The average man may not make any definite Christian profession, but he has never definitely repudiated the Christian religion. Its practical significance for him personally, however, does not count for much. He very rarely attends Divine Worship and his religion, such as it is, has little relation with his normal daily thought and conduct. Many

of our friends have some doubt whether it is still possible to believe in the Bible and they are reluctant to accept as truth anything which cannot be verified by reason. The horrors of the War have now made them realize the hopelessness of materialism as a working creed. They are inclined to admire and envy those who seem to find complete satisfaction in their religious belief and at times they wonder whether they, too, can acquire a simple but firm faith in the over-ruling Providence of God.

It is our task to make them realize that a merely passive willingness to believe is not sufficient. Faith in God can only be gained or regained by a definite act of the will. Those ready for the venture must be prepared to launch out into the unknown and to trust and obey—a real willingness to believe will be rewarded in due course by knowledge and understanding. Every preacher must keep these thoughts in mind particularly on the occasions when the nation is summoned by the king and those in authority to Prayer and Thanksgiving. It may be assumed that at such times many men and women are present in church who with a wistful longing are saying in their hearts and minds :

“ O God, thou art my God ; earnestly will I seek Thee.

My soul thirsteth for Thee, my flesh longeth for Thee.”

THE LINE OF APPROACH

We have good grounds for believing that every man is conscious at times of an inward urge towards God. To quote again from Professor Simpson : “ Just as mammals at one stage used their forepaws to feel out, with resultant mental development from the stimuli, tactile and visual, of that with which they came in contact, so man has satisfied an inherent responsiveness to a Power which he realizes is there, and is something beyond him. . . We are here in a particular kind of world, both in its physical and spiritual aspects, and we have got to come to terms with it. But we can also, in part, control and co-operate with it, and the more we learn of its character the more we come to see in it, to speak broadly, a sustained and directed process, in and through which God, under specific self-limitations, is even now revealing Himself to men.”

The next step obviously is towards God in Christ. In every Christian country He is the ideal to Whom the awakened minds nearly always turn for hope and inspiration.

Christ came into a desolate world which had lost both faith in itself and faith in God. It was the crucial moment in human history and the attraction of His personality drew all men of goodwill to His feet in wondering adoration. Man had reached the stage when a response to the appeal of a Perfect Life was possible. All Christians believe that the whole world-process becomes meaningless apart from the Incarnation. The problem is to interpret the Living Christ in relation to the spiritual needs and burdens of the modern world. It is not so difficult as it was at the beginning of the Christian era for we now have behind us twenty centuries of human history in which the spiritual distress of mankind has remained constant and in which Christ has proved Himself to be all-sufficient. It has always been the distinctive characteristic of Jesus that in a unique way in daily companionship with Him, men feel more sure of God than in any other way or relationship. Christianity not only first gave a meaning to history, but alone, throughout the ages, has given objectivity to truth. In the words of Holy Scripture, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and to-day and for ever." This is the first common denominator of the living message which we must pass on. How it can be done on a national scale depends on circumstances and opportunities as they arise from time to time. At the present moment the question of religious instruction in the Day Schools throughout the country is generally recognized as a matter of urgent importance. We believe that the education of the young can and should be related to the Christian way of life, but this does not mean that children are to be instructed in the doctrines and dogmas which have split the Catholic Church into many sections. The main thing is that they should know at the very beginning of their education that the principles of Christianity are vitally important for the well-being of the world as a whole. As they grow older they will learn more about it at home and in the church of their parents and, contrary to what has been the case for many years past, they will begin their working days with a conviction that religion is really a matter of supreme importance.

That will be the time to build upon the foundation which has been laid and incorporate them into the building not made with hands which will endure for ever.