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The Bible in English History

BY STEPHEN NEILL

JOHN RICHARD GREEN, in his *Short History*, made the famous remark that in the reign of Queen Elizabeth the English people became the people of a book and that book the Bible. It is hardly too much to say that in the sixteenth century the English language became the language of one book, and that book the Bible; and, since the language that men speak penetrates to the very recesses of their being, and influences thought and attitude and judgment in ways that are past reckoning, it is no exaggeration to maintain that the English Bible was, up till the end of the nineteenth century, one of the strongest creative forces that made and moulded the English way of life and the history of the English people.

It is hard to think of two historical events more important than the production of the first New Testament in modern English by Tyndale in 1528, and the order of Henry VIII in 1538, which made possible the setting up of the Great Bible in English Churches, and the reading aloud of the Word of God in a language understood of the people. All the evidence goes to show that at that time folk in England fell in love with the Bible; they would have it and hear it and make it their own. Nevertheless, it was only fifty years later that the Bible took hold on the mind and heart of the people generally in the profound manner that finds expression in the remark of J. R. Green. In this respect the reign of Queen Elizabeth is more important than that of either Henry VIII or Edward VI. For this, several reasons can be adduced. Once the troubles of the age had begun a little to abate, Protestantism let loose, as it always does, a great surge of educational effort; probably far more people could read at the end of the sixteenth century than at its beginning. Many more copies of the Scriptures, and in much cheaper editions, became generally available; it was the Geneva Bible, with its liberally provided Calvinistic annotations, that first became the Bible of the English people as a whole. In those days everyone had to go to church, whether they wished to or not. The lessons were far longer than the irregular fragments which are served up to us in our more recent lectionaries; Cranmer gave us never less than a chapter, and, if a chapter seemed a little short, he gave us two to make up. It is possible, as we all know well, to sleep through the lessons; yet the words regularly heard do in some mysterious way penetrate the mind; those of us who have attended daily service in school chapels for four years know that we have carried away something ineffaceable, though we might find it hard to say exactly what it was.

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth, only a limited number of the clergy were licensed to preach—the pulpit could be a dangerous political weapon. Others were limited to the reading of the Homilies. These

rather lengthy documents would be found heavy going by most congregations today; and I do not suppose that the ploughboys and dairymaids of four hundred years ago could follow them in detail—they probably spent more time looking at one another. Yet once again, the massive biblical theology of the Homilies, with their many actual quotations, must have left a certain deposit in the mind, a certain familiarity not only with the words but with the biblical way of looking at things, and at least the rudiments of a Christian judgment.

The result, and here I think once again all the evidence points in the same direction, was a most notable raising of moral standards throughout the nation. The question of the ethical results of the Reformation has been rather bitterly debated by historians. There is no doubt that the Reformers, from Luther on, complained sadly and often in biting terms of the wickedness that they saw around them, even in such centres of Reformed teaching as Geneva and Wittenberg. But such complaints of sinfulness can spring from a more sensitive conscience and a raising of expectation and demand, no less than from an actual deepening of corruption or degeneration of standards. To compare the moral achievement of one age with that of another is a difficult and delicate operation, and here there is no precise certainty. I am inclined to think that in the early days of the Reformation in England there was a lowering of standards. There was a relaxation of the restraints and controls which had still to some extent held society together in the late Middle Ages; the reign of Edward VI was a bad and reckless time, in which the fortunes of both State and Church fell into evil hands: when the leaders were so bad, it is not surprising that the rank and file were all too ready to profit by their example. Yet even that bad time produced such spotless flowers as the Lady Jane Gray, a blameless Christian, who would almost certainly have been canonized, if she had belonged to the Roman Catholic and not to the Reformed faith. But, when we come to the reign of Elizabeth, I believe that it is possible to trace a steady rise in ethical standards, and a corresponding improvement in conduct. The court continued to be medieval, and had its full share of violence and scandals. But by the end of the reign there are signs of that solid, unobtrusive piety, with its strong ethical emphasis, which has been characteristic of English religion until recent times. All that was most vigorous and creative in the national life had rallied to the Protestant cause; especially after the defeat of the Armada, the age of Elizabeth was a time of great hopes and great achievements; the expressions of faith in God and of his purpose for his English people may well have been more than conventional.

We are very badly off for personal diaries and similar intimate records of the sixteenth century, though a certain number have come to light. What many of us have found illuminating has been the record of the Puritan gentry, as revealed to us in Prof. J. E. Neale's superb volumes on Elizabeth and her Parliaments. No doubt quite a number of these gentlemen were prickly, and professors of a less than attractive piety; one cannot but sympathize with the Queen at times when she packed them off to the Tower. Yet the spirit of deep seriousness that breathes through them is notable; these men knew what it meant to be Christians and responsible Christians, and it was in the

light of the word of God that they desired that both their actions and their Church should be judged.

I am inclined to think that much can be learned about this period from the plays of Shakespeare. Many studies have been made of Shakespeare's religion, all inconclusive; the man hides himself from us behind his work. But some years ago, when I read through the entire Shakespearean corpus in nine months, I ended with the impression of a deep influence of the Bible on Shakespeare's mind. He rarely quotes directly, and the frequency of the allusions naturally varies very much from play to play. Yet reading in roughly chronological order I felt that the biblical influence grows stronger, as one moves forward with Shakespeare in his work. This is a profoundly moral universe; here is man's life seen from every conceivable angle, and in its rich and endless variety; but basically this is man's life as lived in the presence of God; to be a man is always a splendid thing, and it is the hallmark of a true man that he knows how to live responsibly in freedom.

If we speak of the influence of the Bible, it is necessary to distinguish between three different aspects of what we are talking about. There is first knowledge of what is in the Bible, simple acquaintance with its text. Then there is an understanding of the way in which the Bible thinks, a relatedness to the Bible point of view and to its judgment on human life. Thirdly, there is the attempt to take seriously the application of the law of God to the affairs of men in personal and in public life.

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When we come to the seventeenth century, I am inclined to think that knowledge of the text of the Bible continued to grow and to spread. Every great house had its chaplain; the daily offices of the Church of England were read every day to the entire household, which in those days was very large. We find on both sides in the civil war numbers of laymen with a deep knowledge of theology and a serious interest in the whole question of the will of God for man. The Puritans are beginning to come into their own again today, and to recover from the effects of the caricature brilliantly presented by Macaulay and others of his day. No doubt there was much that was narrow, prejudiced, and foolish. But what stands out in the real Puritans is, first, their intense sense of the responsibility of man in the presence of God—a lesson we might learn again profitably today, when there is rightly so much talk of the responsible society; and, secondly, the quiet joy by which they were thrilled in the sense of reconciliation with God and of vocation to His service. In a very real sense the men of that time were still medieval. The modern world, with its sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular, was not yet upon them. There were already signs of its coming; but the two great books which in different ways indicated the change from the mood of the Middle Ages, Locke *On the Human Understanding* and Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, were not published until respectively 1687 and 1690. Men still saw the universe as a single whole under the sovereignty of God; indeed Newton himself so saw it, though he was one of the chief architects of that independence of

scientific thought from the idea of God which is still one of our problems today. Men still dreamed of a unified society, in which the same men were under one aspect citizens, and under another churchmen, the two societies being co-extensive, and both under the direction of the Word of God, thought in different manners corresponding to the discrete responsibility of each. There were very differing ideas as to the way in which Church and State should be organized—that was ultimately what they fought each other about. But the use of the word "state" in this context is really an anachronism; the wholly autonomous and impersonal state was a creation of a later age, though thinkers of later days could look back to Hobbes' *Leviathan* as a precursor of their own type of thinking.

Yet something else was stirring under the surface in those days, which was laden with great promise for the future, and itself was based on certain profound convictions derived from the Scriptures. The word "democracy" is used in so many different senses today that perhaps it were better for the time being abandoned. In British history, democracy can trace its origins to Christian faith, and to a particular understanding of certain parts of the biblical message. The independents lit upon a new concept of human personality and responsibility, and went beyond the discoveries of the other reformers and reformations. In their meetings of believers, it was held that all who were born of the Spirit were in every way equal in the sight of God; the word might at any moment be given to any of them, and to this genuine word of God all others must pay humble and reverent attention. To this conviction was allied a particular understanding of the nature of the Church, which in later times it has become fashionable to call, not quite fairly, the sect type. Carried to its extremes, this conviction might be thought well calculated to lead to total anarchy; yet perhaps it is not very far removed from the picture given by Paul of church meetings in Corinth; and the men who professed this view were not greatly afraid of anarchy, since they held that, where a meeting was held under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in reliance on Him, God who is a God of order would see to it that His own will should prevail.

It was not a long step to carry this understanding of man and his potentialities over from the Church to the world, and from the intimate society of the Church to the larger society, the nation or the people. And this step was in fact taken, though naturally in a hesitant and uncertain fashion. But it is to these groups of largely simple men, acting in reliance on what they believed to be a correct understanding of the Bible, that we should look for at least one of the main roots of what we understand as democracy today. Another very different type of democracy has its origin in the thought of Rousseau and the idea of the rights of man; it may be thought that Rousseau too had learned something from the Bible. American democracy in its origins is a curious mixture of the two streams—a rather rationalistic and deistic reading of the Bible, and a good deal of eighteenth century French thought—though it is to be noted that the last thing that the Founding Fathers had any idea of was that they were founding a state that might one day turn into a democracy, and many passages can be quoted from their writings, in which they plainly express their horror at the very

thought of democracy ; good classicists, they may have agreed with the Athenian Alcibiades that democracy is acknowledged folly. In later times, British democracy has been affected by thoughts and ideas derived from many sources ; it is not a clear stream. And it is hard to trace our present system back in any detail to biblical concepts. Yet many Christians today would affirm that, if they believe democracy to be ultimately the only form of government compatible with the Christian apprehension of man, they learned the principles from those obscure forerunners in the seventeenth century, and from their conviction that the poorest he in England hath a life to live as much as the richest he. It was from the neglected doctrine of the Holy Spirit that the idea of Christian equality was derived.

The *Pilgrim's Progress* has been translated into more languages than any other book except the Bible. It is in its own right a work of pure genius. But it is also interesting, as showing more clearly than any other work written up to its time in English the direct effect of the Bible on the English language and English style. Almost the whole literature of the seventeenth century is deeply marked by the Bible. The massive and profound mind of Milton, scholar and lay theologian, wrestles endlessly with the ways of God and the destiny of man. In *Samson Agonistes*, which some would regard as an even more perfect work than *Paradise Lost*, he shows how an English mind can take a biblical theme, rethink it after the Greek fashion, and miraculously produce out of it a noble and characteristically English work of art. In all the utterances of his organ voice, both in prose and poetry, biblical themes and thoughts recur. Yet the style is not the least that of the Bible. And the same is true of the poets. Donne and Herbert are influenced by the standards of their time, and even some of their best work is marred by conceits, which can be understood in terms of the canons of the day, and yet fall far below the highest level of artistic expression. Rhetoric and elaboration still hold the field. The eloquence is often splendid ; and English literature would be far poorer without Hooker and Sir Thomas Browne. All the more notable is the change that comes over English, both poetry and prose, but particularly prose, towards the end of the seventeenth century. And it is here that Bunyan is so significant. A man of comparatively little culture, his mind had been formed far more on the Bible than on any other model ; and he, for the first time, showed how imagination and simplicity can go hand in hand, and produce that which is memorable and moving with recourse to no more than the simplest artifice.

It is most unlikely that those who developed the new style had undergone the influence of Bunyan. Similar developments can occur at the same time in complete independence of one another, and Bunyan may be held to be a symptom rather than a cause. And it is difficult to trace direct influence of the Bible in the new, and almost timeless, English that was coming into being. It is, however, interesting to note that three of the most distinguished writers of the first half of the eighteenth century were churchmen—Bishop Butler, Bishop Berkeley, and Dean Swift ; their minds were steeped in the letter of the Bible, and perhaps something of the vigour and clarity of the Authorized Version have found their way into the clarity and vigour with which

these writers expressed their thoughts. Sir Roger de Coverley no doubt had a good knowledge of the Bible, as well as of the sermons of Dr. South and Dr. Tillotson ; and some of this he may have passed on to his friends, Mr. Addison and Mr. Steele.

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The eighteenth century is the period in which we begin to see steadily growing the sense of the duality of things ; an outer world which science is increasingly rendering autonomous, so that it becomes more and more difficult to find any place for God in it ; and a world of piety which finds it increasingly difficult to relate itself to the affairs of everyday life. Yet recent research has to some extent restored the credit of that century, and shown that, along with much that was corrupt and cynical, there was still a solid basis of goodness in the English character. The reader of the Bible was selective, as we all are ; he could take in only those aspects of it which were, to use a much later expression, on his wave length. The one attribute of God which, more than any other, seems to have had significance for eighteenth century man was benevolence ; God is kindly, and has ordered His creation for the benefit of man. Man is most like God when he is exercising benevolence. The theme recurs endlessly in the literature and the sermons of the time. And from thought came action : the Charity Schools of the reigns of Queen Anne and of the Georges were a genuine expression of Christian charity and the will to serve. No doubt this will was limited in understanding and lacked passion. Men did not see beyond the immediate effects of inequality and poverty, and their thought did not go beyond doing what could be done, without any great effort, to relieve the hardships. They were blind to many things that to us are self-evidently evil, as we in our turn no doubt have our blind spots. They did not conceive of such radical changes in the whole system as might make these evils a thing of the past. But such far-reaching prophetic vision is not given to all, and it is better to praise our fathers for what they did than to criticize them too harshly for what they failed to do.

In a wholly different direction the influence of the Bible is writ deep on the mind and life of eighteenth century England. This was the century in which the English hymn began to come into its own. Luther had been a great writer of hymns and adapter of earlier material. He had many followers. An astonishing proportion of the hymns still sung in Germany today, and many of the noblest melodies, are of the sixteenth century. We have hardly anything to show in comparison. Cranmer could write glorious prose ; but, as he himself ruefully admits, he had no gift at all for writing verse—and this is to put it kindly. From the seventeenth century we can quote certain splendid hymns ; but most of these were written as poems, not hymns, and there is always a difference between the two kinds of composition—a difference not always noted by the compilers of hymnals. It is only with Dr. Watts and Mr. Wesley that our great period really begins. This is of quite incalculable importance. Tell me what Christians sing, and I will estimate fairly accurately the quality of their spiritual life. Hymns penetrate the mind and spirit ; and perhaps the religion of the average Englishman is more deeply determined by the hymns which he learned

as a child than by any other single factor. If he has been condemned to learn "We are but little children weak", and "There's a friend for little children", it is not surprising if later on he becomes profoundly unreligious.

The great thing about the hymns of Watts and the Wesleys is that they are so profoundly biblical. A few are deliberate paraphrases—the tradition of the metrical Psalms was already well established. But on the whole these hymns are independent compositions in which the biblical material has been taken over, freely handled, and adapted to a wholly different medium of communication. "Jesu, Lover of my soul" is almost a patchwork of biblical allusions, the first being rather surprisingly from the Apocrypha; and, though the most popular, is certainly not one of the best of the Wesleys' hymns. Charles Wesley especially, has a rich vocabulary of his own, and does not depend too closely on the biblical wording. Who but Charles Wesley would have thought of beginning a hymn with the words, "Jesus in whom my soul hath sought Her late but *permanent* repose"?

The tradition of hymn-writing, once set in motion, has never died out, and each generation has some distinguished writing to show. But never again was the standard of the eighteenth century attained. The only later writer who can compare with the Wesleys is Reginald Heber, Bishop of Calcutta. It is only at his very best that John Keble comes anywhere near the level of Heber. It is known that Heber had planned to write a complete set of hymns for the Church's year, when some ill-judging friend dissuaded him from carrying out his purpose, to our tragic and lasting loss; how much richer would our hymn-books be, if we had another fifty hymns of the standard of "Holy, holy, holy", and "Brightest and best of the sons of the morning"!

As the eighteenth century went on, the influence of the Bible tended to decline. As the Evangelical Revival took hold, in the Church of England as well as among the non-Anglicans, it tended steadily to revive again.

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Symptomatic of the change is the foundation in 1804 of the British and Foreign Bible Society, that marvellous precursor of so much later ecumenical activity. Once again a planned and systematic attempt was made to bring the Bible within reach of the ordinary reader. But the society has affected the Englishman's knowledge of Scripture in a very peculiar way. Of those who possess Bibles in England today, probably not one in ten has ever seen the Apocrypha. Owing to the honest convictions of some nonconformists, the Society decided not to print Bibles that could be used in Church. I myself find it very hard to understand how reputable scholars can place the books of the Apocrypha on the same level, or almost on the same level, as the inspired books of the Hebrew Canon. I find Sirach one of the dullest authors who ever wrote, and in my opinion we read far too much of him in our present lectionaries (not so much this year, Easter having been rather late). All the same, it seems to me to be a great pity that other bodies should have followed the Bible Society in this reduction of the Bible; and, in

view of the historical importance of some of the books of the Greek Canon, they surely ought to be there.

To the intensity of Bible study among the Evangelicals Canon E. W. Watson is witness in his excellent little book on the Church of England. It would have been well, if not quite so much time had been spent on the study of unfulfilled prophecy. But, on the whole, Bible-reading was a very practical business ; men recovered the idea of a will of God which is to prevail in the affairs of men. The Evangelical leaders were never tired of appealing to "the conscience of a Christian nation"—a somewhat optimistic form of words, yet the success of their countless enterprises for the good of mankind and the relief of suffering show that, optimistic as they may have been, they were not visionary. They believed that conscience is the voice of God in man ; that conscience can be educated and refined through the pondering of the Word of God ; and that when a man is prepared to respond in obedience the Holy Spirit will show him just what he should do. It was in this spirit that the Evangelicals sallied forth to do battle with the evils of slavery and industrial injustice. With a rueful realism they were well aware of the limits of what can be achieved by legislation ; yet as far as man could go on this road, they would go. They were limited in horizon by the circumstances of their time ; they did not see that the industrial revolution which had been used by wicked men for the enslavement of a large part of the human race could, in the providence of God, come to be used for its emancipation. It was left for their successors to see and to proclaim that vision.

One of the hoary old myths, that no production of the evidence seems able to kill, is to the effect that the Church did little for education, and that the education of the nation was undertaken only when the radicals passed the great Act of 1870. In point of fact, through the efforts of the Churches, notably through the National Society and the British Schools Society, England had, before 1870, been provided with almost as many school places as there were children, though owing to the immense shift of population in the nineteenth century many of the schools were in the wrong places, and building had not caught up with the growth in population. In all these schools the Bible was the basis of education. It was taught crudely, unintelligently, unimaginatively ; yet the teaching of it meant that the children were exposed week in week out to some of the greatest literature in the world, and were imbued with something of its spirit and its outlook on the world. They were not, however, encouraged to think such dangerous thoughts as might arise from taking such revolutionary passages as the Magnificat too literally ; the Bible was generally regarded as a useful safeguard for the existing social order. Perhaps the most notable comment on the success of this Christian education was a remark of Thomas Hardy in *Tess of the Durbervilles* to the effect that Tess, like all the poor, knew the Bible well. Hardy understood remarkably well the people of whom he wrote ; if he said that it was so, it was so—and it certainly would not be true today.

It is impossible to read much of the literature of the mid-nineteenth century without receiving a very clear and sharp impression of the penetration of the minds of the writers by biblical phrases and biblical

thoughts. The process had begun long before the beginning of the Victorian age. The most seminal mind of the nineteenth century was perhaps that of Coleridge ; we encounter his influence at almost every point, and in men like Bishop Westcott who lived till the beginning of the twentieth century. Coleridge read the Bible, not as a collection of theologumena, proof texts for the defence of an orthodox system, but with a lively and imaginative mind ; it was to him the book that *found* him as no other book found him ; it was on this quality of direct and burning relevance that he founded his understanding of the inspiration of Scripture. Unquestionably, this attitude helped many of the theologians, who were trying to find their way out of the painful literalism of earlier days without losing their grip on the essentials of the biblical faith ; but his attitude is reflected also in many of the greatest lay writers of the century, who, while not finding it possible to commit themselves to the acceptance of every detail of Christian dogma, yet desired to make the Christian standards the guide of their footsteps.

We are at last beginning to grow away from the Lytton Strachey picture of the smug and hypocritical Victorians, and to recognize in them a generation of gifted, passionate, and terribly sincere people, restless, questioning, and often dissatisfied. We may take Tennyson as, in this respect, the typical Victorian. *In Memoriam* could not have been written unless Tennyson had had a minute and extensive acquaintance with the text of the Bible ; but this, like most of his later writings, is not so much the expression of a robust and confident faith as the confession of a seeking spirit, always wrestling with the new problems of the age, and never able to find a completely satisfying solution of them. Matthew Arnold was to carry further this note of scepticism ; yet he was a true Victorian, with his almost missionary sense of vocation to transmit to his contemporaries his own intelligent but reduced version of the biblical faith. A stronger note is heard in Robert Browning, who, like Tennyson, never felt quite at home in orthodox Christian circles, but whose understanding of the essence of biblical theology is profound. It has to be admitted that the David of his *Saul* is a highly romantic figure, who has little to do with the robber-chieftain of the cave of Adullam. Yet in *A Death in the Desert* Browning was to produce what a number of good authorities regard as the best existing exposition of the theology of the Fourth Gospel.

This Biblical character of nineteenth century literature is perhaps seen best in two writers who, though not among the greater, are perhaps for that very reason among the most characteristic—Charles Kingsley and John Henry Newman. Neither of these men could have been produced by any soil other than that of England ; neither could have been what he was apart from the solid Evangelical background of biblical thinking. And, different as the two men were in almost every respect, and almost predestined to be adversaries even had they never actually engaged in their celebrated controversy, one can trace curious lines of resemblance and similarity between them. Three poets who, towards the end of the century, were to express a rather more confident Christian faith—Coventry Patmore, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Francis Thompson—were all, as it happened, Roman Catholics. The biblical quality is not wholly absent from their writing ; it is interesting

to note that now it seems to be rather a remote echo than of the very substance of their thinking and their self-expression.

At one crucial point the rediscovery of the Bible has left its mark deep on the subsequent history of the British people. Frederick Denison Maurice had, like almost all his contemporaries, learned a great deal from Coleridge ; and it was in the name of the Bible, intelligently read and independently understood, that he was to challenge the false philosophy which was leading the world into destruction. For the serious thing about the industrial revolution was not that it was an age of poverty and distress for many—poverty had always existed, and famine was not unknown in Britain—but that the new inequalities and hardships were being justified by a system of thought which eliminated the truly human in favour of abstract principles and a supposed identity of interests. Maurice was a prophet for the industrial age. It is not always easy to understand the drift of his thought ; but in all his countless sermons and lectures on Scripture, the recurrent thought is that of the sovereignty of Christ over all realms of being ; there are no autonomous areas which may withdraw themselves from the scrutiny of His law or the authority of His kingdom. The old Christian concepts of charity and benevolence, never completely out of date, are not adequate to cope with the demands of this situation. The Christian Socialism of Maurice was a new and creative discovery, a reading out of the Bible of something that was genuinely there. Whenever the World Council of Churches pronounces today on some great issue of social or economic import, consciously or unconsciously, it is following on the path that Maurice, often dimly and confusedly, saw as the way of the coming of the kingdom of God among men.

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And now the situation has almost wholly changed. For the first time since the Reformation the Bible is an unknown book to the majority of the people of England. This is a fact of which there cannot be the smallest doubt, though opinions may differ widely as to the reasons for the great change that has taken place. There is still a good deal of diffused awareness of the Christian faith ; this comes out at Christmas and Easter, and not only in the superficial and undesirable elements of purely secular merry-making. Even modern man cannot escape from the biblical temper of the English language. Men still escape by the skin of their teeth, and welcome back the prodigal—though they might well be hard put to it to explain the origin of the phrases. But the experience of clergy and teachers alike confirms the impression of the less directly concerned observer that the vast majority of people in Britain never open a Bible, have very little idea indeed of what is in it, and are hardly influenced at any point by the biblical tradition of which we have been speaking.

This impression is confirmed by a glance at the literature of recent years. I have long held the opinion that George Meredith was the first purely non-Christian writer of the modern world in Britain. It was not that he was strongly against the faith ; but in so many of his books he succeeded in writing as though the Christian faith simply did not exist, or, at least, did not exist as a subject in which any intelligent

man could be expected to take an interest. In this he has had a great many successors. Many modern writers give the impression that they have never in their lives met an intelligent Christian. One of the most typical figures of this century was John Maynard Keynes the economist. His biography makes it clear that, after his contemptuous rejection of the Christian faith while a boy at Eton, he never gave it another thought, and seems never to have asked himself why a number of his contemporaries, of intellect equal to his own, were still humble and confessing Christians. It is this attitude of supreme indifference that is the greatest danger to the faith—greater than that of the direct attacks upon it, since these at least presuppose that the enemy is worthy to be attacked.

The disappearance of the biblical tradition may be traced on three levels.

There is, first, the sheer ignorance of the text, to which we have already alluded. The means, among other things, that Jesus Christ is to the average Englishman of today a mainly mythological figure, and the mental picture of Him which has formed itself in his mind bears very little relation indeed to the majestic and tragic figure which we meet in the Gospels.

Next, there is the fading out of the Bible way of thinking. In the ages of faith, man was always seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is a great and dangerous thing to be a man. There is a purpose of God in history, though it may not always be easy to discern it. And actions taken in time have eternal consequences. The contemporary picture of man is as different from this as could be imagined. He is thought of in biological, sociological, and economic terms. Far more than we recognize we have yielded to the Marxist heresy, and think in Marxist rather than in Christian terms.

When it comes to practical action, the last thing that would occur to most men would be that guidance might be found in the Bible. In the past men have often looked naively and uncritically to the Bible for guidance, and have asked of it questions that it was never meant to answer, and in point of fact does not answer. But they were right in thinking that the Bible does reveal to us the great principles on which any true human life for man or nation must be based ; that in wrestling with Scripture we may find light and understanding of our situation and of the will of God for our time. Today we live in an almost wholly pagan society, and our proposed remedies for our ills reflect the barrenness and confusion of our spirits.

It must be recognized that we see around us the beginnings of a new Christian literature and a new Christian art. The fantastically high sales of the new English translation of the New Testament may mean that something is in the wind. But the wisest of us are likely to admit that we do not really know what is to be done about this pagan situation. Improved religious teaching in the schools is one point at which some impression can be made. Broadcasting and television are far from contemptible allies. But the Church is the place where a new beginning has to be made. After all, quite a number of people still do go to church. How often do they hear the lessons read in such a way that they speak to the hearer as the Word of God ? And how often do

they hear from the pulpit plain straightforward exposition of the word of God, the kind of sermon which, while paying full respect to the intelligence of the hearers as grown men and women, is content to tell them just what the Bible says, and just what it means, and, as far as can be discerned, what it has to say to them today? A beginning is only a first step. But here, as in so many other fields, it is always the first step that counts.

The Revised Catechism

BY JAMES PACKER

THE labours of the Commission which the Archbishops appointed in February, 1958 to revise the Church Catechism are now before us (*A Revised Catechism*, S.P.C.K., price 2/-). The document is one that evokes both admiration and sympathy for those who produced it. They were set an impossible task, at which they have failed brilliantly. Indeed, their performance is so distinguished that a first reading of their Catechism almost convinces one that they have succeeded; though a second reading gives a truer impression. But it is not their fault that they have not succeeded. What they were asked to do simply could not be done. It is indeed, the very brilliance of their work that brings this out. What they have achieved may be compared with the Charge of the Light Brigade (we hope they will not resent this; it is an honourable comparison). They have made a noble attempt at something which it was not sense to ask them to do, and which in the circumstances was bound to be some sort of a failure. "Someone had blunder'd"—they were given unrealistic orders. Prayer Book revision, like diplomacy, is the art of the possible, and some things are not possible. Part of what statesmanship means is that one confines oneself to the realm of the possible. A study of the Revised Catechism serves only to confirm what should have been clear in 1956, when the Archbishops were asked to set up the Commission—namely, that it is not possible to revise the Catechism satisfactorily with the Church of England in her present state.

What was the Commission set to do? Its terms of reference gave it a double task. It was "to consider the revision of the Church Catechism in order that its scope may be enlarged and its language made more suitable for present conditions".

Now the *second* of these tasks was undoubtedly practical politics. It was simply a matter of eliminating archaisms and anachronisms, of seeing that all the wording of the new Catechism was in line with contemporary speech, and that all references to social and cultural matters were made in up-to-date terms. The Commission has, in fact, done this part of its work very ably. For simplicity and conciseness,