

# THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

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## Notes of Recent Exposition.

THE prominence given to symbolism in religion has caused religious truth to be looked upon with suspicion by many. It is felt to be less dependable, less firmly grounded in reality than the well-established truths of science.

This whole subject, which is one of great importance, is finely treated in *Symbolism and Belief*, by Dr. EDWYN BEVAN (Allen & Unwin; 15s. net). This book contains the Gifford Lectures delivered in Edinburgh in 1933-34, and it merits, and will doubtless receive, the most careful attention from students of the subject. It is marked by profound insight, ripe thought, and a rare maturity of judgment. It is impossible in these notes to give any adequate idea of its wealth in historical and exegetical criticism, in philosophic and scientific argumentation, and in constructive religious thinking.

One point touched upon, but perhaps not sufficiently emphasized, is that physical science is as full of symbolism as religious thought. Max Planck, the greatest of scientists, says that the difference between the physical reality and the scientific representation of it is as great as the difference between a cow and the picture of a cow. 'Directly observable quantities do not appear at all in the world picture. It contains nothing but symbols.'

Accordingly the youthful preacher who tries to startle his people by announcing that the language

of the Apocalypse is nothing but symbol, as if that were specially true of that particular book, is not saying anything very enlightening or helpful. As a matter of fact there is no more symbolism in St. John's vision of the New Jerusalem than there is in Bohr's picture of the atom or Einstein's theory of relativity. They are all endeavouring, each in his own way, to picture the unpicturable.

From the days of the great Greek thinkers men have felt the difficulty of expressing in any worthy way their thoughts about God and the spiritual world, and they have been compelled to use imagery which may be called anthropomorphic. They have done this with quite open eyes because no other course was possible. It shows culpable ignorance, therefore, of the history of religious thought to suppose, as Julian Huxley and others do, that 'it is only very modern, relatively enlightened, thinkers in the Christian Church who are at last beginning to shed the traditional anthropomorphism.'

Plato knew perfectly well what he was doing when he put his highest truths in the form of myths, and Plotinus clearly indicates his own procedure. 'Since no phrase you can use about the Supreme is adequate to the Reality, all you can do is to throw out your phrase at It and then deny that the phrase is true. This leaves a kind of impression or idea in the hearer's mind, but at the same time prevents him from committing himself to it too fast and fixedly.'

The impossibility of getting rid of symbolism may be illustrated by reference to all the words denoting 'height' which are applied to God and to His home in heaven above and to all things that have value. To this topic Dr. Bevan has devoted two fascinating lectures. In speaking of the Most High God who dwells in heaven above there seems to be a focussing in one compound feeling of different aspects and implications of spacial height. There is the feeling of power as in a blow coming from above or in a man standing over another who is prostrate on the ground. There is the wider range of vision which elevation gives, and the consequent power to guide and command. There is also the feeling that to climb upwards is hard and the sky is an unattainable altitude. All these complex thoughts and feelings find appropriate expression in words indicative of spacial height, and they are not in the slightest degree affected, as some foolishly suppose, by Copernican astronomy or any scientific theory. They are inescapable. If we try to express ourselves in more abstract and philosophic language and speak of the 'transcendence' of God and the 'sublimity' of things divine, we discover that we are merely using Latin words expressive of spacial height.

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The question may be raised as to what type of symbols it is best to use, whether the plain and homely symbols derived from material things and the experiences of daily life or the more abstract ideas of the philosopher, which, it should always be remembered, are just as full of symbolism as the former.

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In this connexion the words of a French writer, Jean Guittou, may be quoted: 'Now since man cannot any way escape from the snares of metaphor, is it not well to have recourse to the homelier metaphors? Mythical imagery, used by a thinker who can subordinate it to his purpose, has in this respect an advantage. In the first place it can furnish instruction, telling and explicit, for the common man. And is there any real danger of its leading the wise man astray? The crying disproportion between the image and the reality it represents warns him that the words are only

expedients and makeshifts. Their very poverty helps him to realize that God is beyond every possible conception, every possible image.' But if more subtle language is used, and imagery derived from the working of the human mind, there is an insidious danger lest such language should be taken as more than symbolic, as adequate to the reality to be expressed. 'We shall never surmount the limits by which nature has circumscribed us. But while the mental anthropomorphism in assimilating the Divine mode of working to the measure of the human spirit is liable to lead astray, the material anthropomorphism is its own safeguard against its miserable inadequacy.'

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Dean Mansel similarly animadverted on 'that morbid horror of what they are pleased to call anthropomorphism, which poisons the speculations of so many modern philosophers.' He pointed out that all speech about God is symbolic, and held that it was a mistake to suppose you could get to anything more literally true than the anthropomorphic imagery. 'We dishonour God far more by identifying Him with the feeble and negative impotence of thought which we are pleased to style the Infinite than by remaining content with those limits which He for His own good purposes has imposed upon us.' This preference for anthropomorphic imagery, then, is not the *naïveté* of the man who has never perceived its philosophical inadequacy, but the result of a scepticism pushed far enough to feel the inadequacy of all philosophical formulas offered as a substitute.

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'We can see how, if Mansel is right, rational argument about God or the presentation of God's action in the documents of religion may be completely fallacious. Not because the Reality is itself irrational; we may believe that, if God and the actions of God could be known to finite minds, they would exhibit reason in its ultimate perfection, and yet believe that reasonings about God and His actions are fallacious. If all our notions of God are merely images which stand for an inconceivable Reality—counters, as it were, which more or less misrepresent that Reality—our reasonings are no more than the manipulation of such counters, and

the result we arrive at may be remote from the truth. We may have conducted the process of reasoning with flawless consistency all through, but we are operating all the time only with counters, not with the realities themselves.'

To this view of Mansel's Dr. BEVAN inclines to give general assent. It is a commonplace in theology that all our conceptions of God are utterly inadequate to the Reality, all our representations are only figures by which we strive to indicate the unimaginable. 'If this is so, Mansel is reasonable in contending that anthropomorphic imagery may give us the essence of the Reality better than an abstract metaphysical formula which will be just as much beset by the limitations of the human mind and may deceive by its pretence of superior knowledge.'

It would seem to follow from this that religious certitude comes not by processes of logical argumentation but rather is grounded and confirmed in practical experience. 'While our best conceptions of God remain symbols of a Reality we cannot imagine, it is because these conceptions, when acted on, produce a life of a certain quality, as compared with other conceptions of the universe, that the man who believes in God gains assurance that he does right in believing.'

This looks very like Pragmatism, but in reality it differs from the Pragmatic view in respect of the fact that religious faith bases itself upon a Reality which is believed to exist in absolute independence. 'Take the conception of God as a loving Father. Obviously such an idea of God is symbolic. But the Theist or Christian does not merely say, "Act as if there were a God who is a loving Father, and you will find certain desirable results follow" (that is Pragmatism): he says, "Act as if there were God who is a loving Father, and you will, in so doing, be making the right response to that which God really is." God is really of such a character that, if any of us could know Him as He is (which we cannot do) and then had to describe in human language to men upon earth what he saw, he would have to say, "What I see is indescribable, but if you think of God as a loving Father, I cannot put

the Reality to you in a better way than that; that is the nearest you can get."'

In his recently published book, *Doctrines of the Creed* (reviewed elsewhere), Canon O. C. QUICK has a suggestive chapter on the relevance of belief in God. The modern world is asking with a new insistence the question which transcends every other in importance: Why should we believe in God at all? What is the real value of that belief which is at the centre of traditional religion? Briefly, the answer is that to believe in the one eternal God alone gives us the right to speak and think of the universe as being the universe at all. For, if there be no eternal reality above and beyond the changes and chances of temporal succession, 'the universe' is but a phrase fashioned by man for his convenience which merely falsifies the limitless multiplicity and variety of particular events extending for ever into the darkness of the unknown.

To believe in the goodness of the eternal alone enables us to hope that the tiny efforts any of us make after righteousness and truth can have any abiding consequence or value. For, if there be no eternal reality, the same result of dissolution and extinction will wait on all our achievements in the end. Only look far enough ahead, and selfishness and self-sacrifice, sin and holiness, delusion and enlightenment will all come to the same thing. From such a conclusion belief in God affords the only possible deliverance, if we think coherently. Apart from all logical proofs of theism, therefore, and all doctrines of particular revelation and all mystical experience, the mind of man in its most clear-sighted moments will always retain the substance of belief in God, simply because any real rejection of it involves consequences which are intolerable alike to reason and conscience.

'Brave words,' the sceptic will reply, 'but how is it, then, that so many of the keenest and most influential intellects of our time reject your belief as obsolete and worthless?' This is a quite per-

continent question, and must be answered. There are two reasons that explain why the central doctrines of religion are losing their appeal to the human mind. One is the belief which the last century established in general progress and evolution, a belief shared, though with important differences in form, by Marxists, Nationalists, and Humanitarians. To all alike the history of life on this planet is a story of constant development from lower to higher, and the development seems bound somehow to continue. In this respect there is a profound difference between the mind of the ancient and that of the modern world.

The ancients never entertained seriously the notion of general progress. They never saw any reason for thinking that what comes later must be better than what comes earlier. Their golden age was in the past, and any hope of betterment was based on the expectation of a divine intervention, not on the operation of any natural law. But now everybody has a belief in better times ahead. Time is the bringer of all good things, and this prospect provides faith and hope enough to carry people through the present. To seek a reason for this uncritical trust leads us to the second cause of the disfavour into which other-worldliness has fallen.

It is the new control which man by experimental science has won over Nature and is continually extending. The result of it is a quite new consciousness of power which has convinced our generation that human destiny is in human hands. However great may be the dangers, men are sure that they can escape them by the use of their own resources. Here is the great reason why traditional piety and belief in God make so little appeal to the modern world. Salvation lies in some political or economic gospel. For man can do everything that can be done at all by the knowledge and equipment which science puts ready for his use. We can afford to trust the future because there is no limit to what man can do with it. It is this new Titanism of man which has thrust God out of mind and blinded our eyes to the ultimate ends and issues of human living.

Yet it is becoming increasingly evident that modern godlessness must bring what ancient heathenism used to call a nemesis upon its head. When men have abandoned all belief in unchanging and eternal authority over human life, they can reach no agreement as to what ultimate end they ought to pursue, or by what means it is right to pursue it. When there is no agreement on such matters, the appeal is inevitably to force. Accordingly it is to the use of force, physical and psychical, that the adherents of the new gospels betake themselves.

But even the modern world is not allowed to forget that those who take the sword perish with the sword, since force constantly begets force in opposition to itself. And therefore the majority of us live in terror of war, civil, international or economic, which, as experience has shown, must under modern conditions bring disaster to all and victory to none. Of course co-operation could save us. But where is the power that would enable us to co-operate? Government control of press, wireless and education is the modern answer to that question. But official propaganda can only deceive the citizens of one State at a time, and a policy of systematic lying can but increase in the end the confusion it sought to remedy.

But about end and means. We have just said that when belief in eternal realities is abandoned, men can reach no agreement as to the ultimate end they ought to pursue or by what means it is right to pursue it. Well, observe what is actually happening in both respects. As to the end: man's destiny being in his own hands and no authority set over him, what end should he live for, what future should he make for himself? Some say, the establishment of a classless society. Others believe in the dominance of one nation or race over others. And so we have the rival gospels of Communism and Nationalism arrayed against each other. What court is to decide between them? There can be no appeal to any eternal principles of right or justice or truth. Nothing can arbitrate but force. And when the guns and

bombs and poison gas have done their work, will it matter which side claims victory ?

And as to the *means* : if you believe in an eternal principle of right and goodness, the means you take to achieve your good end must be the expression of the same goodness, and morally appropriate to it. If the end is a divine kingdom of righteousness and peace and love, the means you take to move towards it must themselves be the appropriate expression of a righteous, peaceable and loving spirit. For the end you seek is set by eternal principles which lay their authority upon you now.

But if you believe only in some *future* good as the end, there is no reason why your choice of means should be thus limited. Why should not the classless society, which is the Marxist's heaven, be sought by deliberately creating the ruthless dictatorship of the proletariat backed by the methods of the OGPU ? Why should not the noble civilization of the Nationalist's dream issue from an utterly sordid persecution of the Jews ? Once men have thoroughly rejected the thought of the Divine, the other-worldly and the eternal, they will inevitably think that they can justify the blackest crimes in the present, because their result will be some glorious Utopia in the future.

Christians think otherwise. St. Paul's teaching at this point makes a particularly instructive contrast to that of some modern missionaries. He also looked for a glorious age in the future. The Kingdom of God is righteousness and joy and peace in the Holy Ghost ; and no doubt he was thinking primarily of a future world. But the Kingdom was God's ; and therefore it was not future only, but eternal. Therefore, again, he who would enter it fully in the future must begin to enter it now by living according to its law of love even in face of suffering persecution and apparent failure. There is indeed a bringing of good out of evil, of which the Cross of Christ is the sacrament ; but the Christian dialectic depends on the eternal consistency of God's love.

And so we return to the essential meaning and

value of belief in God. It is not the mere clinging, for comfort and guidance, to the orthodoxy of the past. It is not a bulwark against revolution. Modern society is far too like the world which the New Testament condemns not to stand in need of a revolution as drastic as any Communist could wish. Belief in God is the conviction that we may enter now into communion with that living and eternal will of goodness which, because it is above the changes and chances of time, can alone give meaning to their movement and order them towards an end.

A new book by Professor ERNEST F. SCOTT, D.D., of Union Theological Seminary, is sure of a good welcome. The book before us, *The Validity of the Gospel Record* (Nicholson & Watson ; 8s. 6d. net), is the most recent addition to the publishers' series known as 'The International Library of Christian Knowledge.' It represents the author's views on the recent methods of research as applied to the Gospels, particularly on what is known as Form Criticism ; and it is written in a clear and popular style.

In the author's opinion much has been done by modern criticism to push farther back, though not to dispel, the darkness which conceals the primitive tradition. The account of Jesus, it may now be said, was first transmitted orally, and consisted of a great number of separate anecdotes and sayings. This record belonged to the community and was preserved in it. It was thus saved from the caprice of individual reporters. While it was still in the oral phase it came to be moulded according to set patterns, to be invested with more or less conventional forms.

'The Meaning of Form' is one of the author's most topical chapters. There he allows that the recent investigation of form has marked a real advance in Gospel criticism. It may be that too much has been claimed for the new method, and that most of its findings will always remain more or less conjectural. But at least a crevice has been

opened through which we can see some little way into the background of oral tradition.

The forms in which the record is cast are demonstrably artificial, and it might be concluded that the substance of it has also passed through a process. But when we find a community which called itself by the name of Jesus and sought to order its life by His precepts, we may conclude that its account of Him is substantially true. If the Roman Empire was based on ideas which it ascribed to Cæsar, the natural assumption is that Cæsar was a real person who originated those ideas and with them the Empire which preserved his story.

Artificial though the forms are, they may be in harmony with facts. Any narrator will be found to develop a technique of his own, and the form is usually most rigid when the narrative is most matter-of-fact. 'One has only to think of a business letter, a captain's log-book, a policeman's evidence in court, a scientific demonstration.' Indeed artificial form may be said to be the mark of veracity. In the East, more especially, a loose, flexible mode of narration would cause misgiving.

Forms would be adopted when the danger of corruption of the tradition had become apparent, but could still be overcome; and the transposition into form may be taken to mark the true beginning of a Gospel literature. The record did not shape itself automatically, but was shaped by teachers who understood the finer uses of language. While

the chief object of formulation was to preserve and fix the tradition, the further motive was involved of laying hold of those things which it was most desirable to keep.

What determined the selection? Preference would be given to acts and sayings of Jesus which bore more immediately on the present needs of the Church, to incidents which lent confirmation to the beliefs of the Church, especially the central belief that Jesus was the Messiah. But our Gospels are also full of passages which only by a forced ingenuity can be construed as topical, passages which bring out the spiritual value of the story of Jesus and the newness and splendour of His teaching.

In addition to these reasons determining the selection of material Dr. SCOTT names also anxiety on the part of Christian teachers to transmit an authentic record. It was a matter of practical concern to the Church to become acquainted with the Gospel history. It is not to be supposed, however, that the historical tests which Christian teachers employed were of just the same kind as we should use now. 'As yet there was no clear conception of the laws of historical evidence, no means of determining whether an event was possible within the order of nature.' But if, as appears most likely, the various sections of the record were designed for public recital at the church meeting, we have a strong guarantee that they were framed carefully, with a full sense of responsibility. Nothing that was false or unworthy could be admitted into the worship of the assembled brotherhood.