

# THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

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## Notes of Recent Exposition.

PROFESSOR JOHN MACMURRAY'S latest book, *The Clue to History* (S.C.M.; 7s. 6d. net), is a notable one. We have found nothing more stimulating for some time. It opens up wide vistas; it casts light upon dark places. It is the kind of book which lifts one to a mountain-peak from which a wide and varied landscape becomes visible. It explains the past, it illumines the present and indicates a pathway to a hopeful future.

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The author warns us that we may find in reading some degree of the difficulty he experienced in writing. He has done his best to make his meaning plain, and what illustration can do has been done. We confess that it is a book which cannot be understood with a rapid glance. It is no book for an odd moment or even a railway journey. It is full of meat; and requires, as it deserves, patient study. It abounds in paradox, at each of which the reader will have to pause a few minutes to get his breath back. That is not a fault, it is one of the many merits of the book.

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The main thesis is not unfamiliar. It amounts to this: history is meaningless save as the progress of the working out by men of God's purpose with men, namely, the establishment of a universal family of persons—as Kant put it, a Kingdom of Ends. And progress is measurable in proportion to the extent to which successive periods have contributed to the realization of the Divine purpose.

What is exceptional is our author's development of his thesis, the grasp he evidences of past history and contemporaneous happenings, his insight into and explication of the teaching of Jesus. Light is cast on a great variety of themes—the main differences between Greek, Roman, and Hebrew thought, and the vital significance of the last; the achievement and the failure of the Middle Ages; the place of Monasticism; the struggle between Church and State; the real inner meaning of Hitler's war upon the Jews—those are outstanding, and on every one of them Professor MACMURRAY casts new light.

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Our own perplexity is to select any one item for special notice. Let us with acknowledged arbitrariness take part of what is said about the 'discovery' which Jesus made. Jesus, according to our author, discovered that human life is personal. 'This at least is the form of expression which brings our own way of thinking as near to the heart of the matter as we can get it.' Personality is not individualness, it is what distinguishes human life from all other forms. It makes a difference, not of degree, but of kind. This discovery of Jesus was of course implicit in the Old Testament, and in Judaism had been coming nearer the threshold of consciousness. And this discovery of Jesus transformed human history.

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When a man discovers his own essence as a human being, the essence of humanity and, for

the religious consciousness, the nature of God are discovered.

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A society which does justice to 'humanity' will do justice to the two concepts of freedom and equality. Our author's account of essential equality is helpful. The equality in view does not abolish, for example, the master-servant relationship. But that exists only in a limited function, and subordination of one man to another does not involve any personal inequality. 'Superiority of function for a particular purpose only becomes a denial of human equality if it is transferred to the personal field.'

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Similarly with regard to economic systems. The ideal of equality neither justifies nor condemns any economic system as such. What it condemns is the idea of caste—a ruling class and a working class, an aristocratic class and a class of commoners. Caste is due not to any economic system as such, but to the transference to the personal field of distinctions of function relative to economic purposes. Any economic system can be justified under one condition—'that it actually does work in the interests of all concerned better than any other that is possible.'

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Equality is not always realizable. The important thing is that it should be 'intended.' Equality is neither ideal nor fact, it is a principle of human action. 'A society which denies equality is suffering from a general neurosis.' Equality, like freedom, is an immediate corollary of the love which is fundamental—'love is the only possible basis of human unity.' Without that love, freedom and equality, friendship cannot exist. Nor will any society endure which does violence to them. 'Any society of men which is not based on freedom and equality is not a human community. It is a functional organization for a specific purpose which denies the nature of human relationship; and must therefore frustrate itself and in the long run destroy itself.'

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The Church Congress was held last year at Bristol in October. The general subject was *The Gospel to*

*this Generation*, and that is the title of the volume containing the papers and addresses given by various distinguished persons, edited by the Rev. Canon Maurice H. Fitzgerald, and published by Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton at the small price of 2s. 6d. net. The distinguished persons referred to above included the two Archbishops, the Dean of St. Paul's, Canon Tissington Tatlow, and two Presbyterians, the Rev. James Reid and Dr. J. H. Oldham. The aim of the Congress, and of this book, was to define the message of Christianity to the world, and to show how the Church can bring this message home to the hearts and minds of men through its teaching and its life.

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The Congress was fortunate in having Dr. OLDHAM to deal with the leading theme: 'The Content of the Gospel.' He does not deal with his subject in a conventional way, which would probably have produced little more than a catalogue of doctrines. What he does is, first of all, to look at the contemporary situation and the forces which have made it what it is, and then to ask whether the Church has a crucial and decisive witness to bear—a central testimony which must dominate and vitalize not only all our preaching but the whole life and activity of the Church and its members.

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First, then, about the contemporary situation. The key to an understanding of the modern age, we are told by many thinkers, is that man has taken his destiny into his own hands and sought in himself, individually and collectively, the source of all values. The situation which the Church is facing to-day is the outcome of a vast historical experiment. From the time of the Renaissance and the age of discovery Western man has embarked on the illimitable adventure of understanding and mastering the world through the service of his reason and reliance on his own efforts. And the result is an achievement the imposing massiveness of which it requires a stupendous effort of thought and imagination to realize.

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The dogmatic atheism of Communism and the idolatrous worship of the nation are only the culminating expressions of a temper and attitude that

have been for centuries the real driving force of the Western world. And the hope of a better world is looked for in man's capacity through knowledge to control and shape the world. The Church is far too little alive to the fact that through the progress of the social sciences, through the increasing correlation of different branches of knowledge and through the growingly efficient organisation of research, man is steadily acquiring a power to mould the lives of human beings which has greater potentialities, for good and for evil, than his control over physical nature.

In comparison with this unhalting, relentless, triumphant, scientific control of life, our methods of religious influence appear antiquated and homespun, as little fitted to survive in face of the masterful scientific direction and organization of life as village industries and crafts in an age of machine production. Science seems to have made God irrelevant to human life. It offers an alternative means of overcoming physical, social, and even moral evil.

But that is only one side of the picture. Notwithstanding these amazing and intoxicating achievements, it is only too evident that all is not well. We find ourselves in a social crisis which threatens the existence of European civilization. Widespread unemployment is destroying the bodies and souls of men. Instead of becoming master of the world, man is in danger of being enslaved to the machines he has invented and of becoming the plaything of the forces he has brought into existence. There is in wide circles a growing sense of the meaninglessness of life. Man has lost his sense of direction. He finds himself sinking in a mass of relativities. It is partly to escape the burden of responsibility that men seek refuge in a blind surrender to the community.

This leads us to the second part of the paper. What has the Church to offer in this situation? Dr. OLDHAM deals with three points. First of all, he points out that by its very existence the Church is committed to a view of the nature of man totally at variance with the assumptions of the self-reliant humanism which has created the modern world, with its splendours, its sickness, and its doubts. In the

Christian view man is not the master of his own fate. He is a created and dependent being. His existence, his true nature as man, is based on his relation to God. There is an objective truth and justice to which he is meant to conform, and only through such conformity can he achieve his true manhood. Take away that belief (which is widely denied) and you leave nothing to which final appeal can be made except force, and deprive man of that which makes him distinctively human and has been the spring and inspiration of all his strivings towards a higher life.

Whether this view of man is true or not it is of infinite importance to mankind. It is at the same time a decisive challenge to the assumptions and practical beliefs of modern society. If it were only believed it would create a real revolution in the life of mankind. What really matters, what is fundamentally necessary, is a reorientation of men's lives in the light of their relation to God. This is the first point at which the Christian faith challenges the whole thought and behaviour of contemporary society, that the meaning of man's existence is found in his relation to God.

The second thing of supreme importance to be said about the content of the gospel is that it is a *gospel*. It is not primarily a set of ideas or duties, but the story of something that happened in history, something that because it happened has led to a belief about the nature of reality that is staggering and incredible to the natural reason. It is that God by His own act has created a new order of human life in which men are called to live. The gospel is the announcement of a gift, not the presentation of a demand, and it is vital that that order should always be in our mind when we speak of it—not, in the first place, demand, as we incorrigible English moralists are always making it appear, but *gospel*.

The good news which Jesus proclaimed was that the day of deliverance and redemption—the Kingdom of God—was at hand. Its powers were already operative, though its full realization lay in the future. Two 'moments' in this message were the forgiveness of sins, which is central in the Christian message, and, what is equally important, a

new life, a life of sonship. That is clearly what the gospel means in the New Testament. The early Christians were conscious, like their Master, of the presence and working of supernatural forces. They lived with Christ in heavenly places. The advent of the New Age manifested itself in a new quality of life, the character and meaning of which is love.

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This brings us to the third conception in the Christian understanding of life which has immeasurable consequences for the life of our time. It is in the sphere of the relations between persons, and not in the immensities and unfathomable mysteries of Nature, that God makes Himself known. By His grace God has communicated to us a responsible selfhood. And the response which He asks of us is to love and serve Him in other men. This faith, that the end of human existence is a community of love, based on God's creative love to us, has power to redeem our civilization from its menacing one-sidedness and to restore to it health and sanity and a satisfying meaning.

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Why, then, if it has this power, does it come about that a message of such profound significance should have so little force and punch and bite? Why do assertions that transform entirely the meaning of human existence, and that should kindle in men's minds the flame of a living hope, leave them in fact so largely unmoved? Why does the world go its way in all the manifold activities of the common life unperturbed and unchallenged by the startling and revolutionary affirmations of Christian faith? Till we have faced these profoundly relevant questions we have not got to the real heart of the subject of the content of the gospel.

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The answer to them is twofold. The first answer is suggested by the Pope's question in Browning's 'The Ring and the Book'—'well, is the thing we see salvation?' It is the misfortune of the preacher that he has to deal largely in words. And the temptation is always present to substitute words for realities. The Kingdom of God is a realm of *power*. It brings salvation in this present life. It is the actual experience of victory over sin, failure, weakness, and circumstance. And where this is lacking the gospel

is no more than a lovely song. In all effective Christian preaching the note of personal testimony is always present. And our fundamental need in regard to the content of the gospel is to rediscover its meaning in actual experience.

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The second reason which makes it difficult for men to-day to take seriously the preaching of the gospel has to do with the whole structure of modern society. It is the contradiction between the affirmations of the Christian faith and the ends, institutions, and practices of the society in which we live, and therefore one thing that is imperative is that we must create a society which is in accordance with the Christian understanding of the meaning and end of man's existence. If we do not, religion will be relegated to a sphere of unreality, unrelated to the actual life which men have to live. In a society which is assuming responsibility for ordering the lives of its members it is vain to proclaim the gospel merely in words. Where doctrine and practice, word and act, are in fundamental contradiction, religion is bound to appear unreal. The Church in modern society is thus faced with an inevitable and inexorable choice. It must either be content to administer the consolation of an other-worldly religion to a small and dwindling minority of the population, or it must gird itself to a bold and energetic effort to transform the institutions and activities of the community in accordance with the Christian understanding of the nature and destiny of man.

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It is seven or eight years since Dr. James MACKINNON retired from the Chair of Ecclesiastical History in the University of Edinburgh, but his pen continues to be busy. In the six years before his retirement he published his notable four-volume work on 'Luther and the Reformation,' and in the years that have followed he has given us studies of the Historic Jesus, of the Gospel in the Early Church, of the period from Christ to Constantine, and of Calvin and the Reformation. And now comes a fifth volume, *The Origins of the Reformation* (Longmans; 16s. net). It would be difficult to find a parallel to such an achievement.

The purpose of the volume, of which no higher praise can be given than that it is as learned and scholarly as its predecessors, is 'to unfold the operation of the complex factors in the relevant history of the late mediæval period—political, economic, social, constitutional, intellectual, religious, and moral—in which the origins of the Reformation lie, and without which the mission of Luther and his fellow-reformers in the sixteenth century would hardly have been possible.' 'Without such a preliminary review,' it is added, 'the Reformation cannot be adequately understood or interpreted.'

In the political sphere there is the rise of the national State leading to conflict with the papacy. In the economic sphere the widespread antagonism to the papal fiscal system. In the social sphere the persistent attempt on the part of the masses to secure emancipation from the disabilities of the feudal system. In the constitutional sphere the attempt to limit the power of the Pope by that of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the intellectual sphere the transforming influence of the new culture, begotten of the Renaissance. Finally, in the sphere of the religious and moral life there is the reaction against the mediæval doctrinal system and the moral declension of the Church which led to the reformation of faith and practice on the models of Scripture and the Early Church.

Such, then, is the scheme of the book; and it would be rewarding to follow Dr. MACKINNON'S exposition along any of the paths he has marked out. It is not that he takes them up singly and pursues them to the end. Rather is it that they are all to be traced throughout the volume. For the volume is arranged more or less on chronological lines. The biographical interest is, however, allowed free scope in the treatment of great figures like Wiclif, Hus, and Savonarola.

But in the concluding chapter there is a brief review of the various factors which operated towards the Reformation, and we shall dwell upon one of them—the religious factor, as expounded by

Dr. MACKINNON, who sees in the Reformation the culmination of the individualist tendency which had found expression in the sects and the mystic movement of the late mediæval period.

The sects, like the Lollards and the Hussites, tended to develop the separatist spirit. They sought to live in the simplicity of early Christianity, and were hostile to the secularized ecclesiastical form of religion. They prepared the way for that response of the common people which Luther's evangelical teaching evoked. The Reformation inaugurated by Luther was, in fact, in some respects the continuation and the completion of the dissenting movement led by Wiclif, Hus, and others in the two pre-Reformation centuries.

As for the mystics, they too were inclined to separatism. For the union of the soul with God there was no need of Church, or priest, or sacrament. While Luther was deeply influenced by the mystic movement, which persisted even within the Church despite the condemnation of Eckhart and others, he was not led by it all the way of personal access to God. It was only when he went back to Paul by way of Augustine that he reached the end of his search. Not through Church, priest, or sacrament, as he discovered, but by fiducial faith alone is salvation possible. This was his original, distinctive, epoch-making contribution to the Reformation on the religious side.

Dr. MACKINNON'S own standpoint may be gathered from the words that follow: 'In his cardinal principle of justification by faith alone he dealt a fatal blow to mediæval belief and usage by invalidating the doctrine of salvation in and through the sacerdotal Church, discarding root and branch the principle of salvation by meritorious works, and placing the soul in direct relation to God through personal faith. Moreover, he made a clean breach with the mediæval, ascetic conception of the religious life, and substituted for it the freedom of the Christian man, the human life in accordance with the liberty, if also the moral obligation of the Gospel.'