

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

Notes of Recent Exposition.

THE Bishop of Chelmsford carried on a correspondence recently with an intelligent sixth-form boy who could not bring himself to believe in the Christian religion. These 'Letters to Timothy,' twelve in number, have now been published under the title of *Your Faith—or Your Life!* (Longmans; 3s. 6d. net). The decision to publish is well taken, for the letters have a genuine ring about them, are full of wise Christian teaching, and deal in a plain and effective way with the very difficulties which would trouble young and inquiring minds.

The Bishop, to begin with, rightly stresses the fact that the world-situation of to-day calls for decision. We are not in a position to sit still and deal with Christian truth in a calm and speculative way. The world is in a highly dangerous state, and the whole moral outlook is profoundly disquieting. It would be the most fatal error to imagine that Christian morality can live without Christian doctrine. 'All that is wholesome in our civilization has come from generations of training in the Christian Faith, and it is most unlikely that what is a by-product of the Faith will survive if the Faith itself perishes.' In these circumstances, when our Christian civilization is threatened with destruction, we must make up our minds where we are going to stand, and which side we are going to back. 'If the Lord be God follow him, but if Baal, then follow him': that is the issue.

It will not do to hold this great issue in suspense until we have discussed all manner of subsidiary questions and settled all our intellectual difficulties. 'The sensible way to proceed is surely to clarify the mind on the great outstanding truths for which

Christianity stands and then we can in a more leisurely way fill in the details. But to argue about details at the start means that we shall never get anywhere. No sensible person will argue whether Oliver Cromwell's wart was on the left or right side of his nose (or was it on his face?) until he has satisfied himself that the wart-bearer actually lived.'

The first question, therefore, to be tackled is 'What think ye of Christ?' And that question must be tackled in a serious spirit, not in the tone of lofty superiority and patronizing contempt with which people sometimes assail Christianity. 'No branch of thought is treated in the same way as religion. In all other realms the people who have studied the subject are recognized as authorities and their opinions are given weight. But when it comes to Christianity it seems to be assumed that any public figure is entitled to make a pronouncement upon it, and the opinions of such people are gulped down by young men and women as the latest and final word on this subject which is surely the most important of all.'

The Christian belief in the Divinity of Jesus Christ is a tremendous faith, and one not lightly to be accepted: but also, not lightly to be rejected. It is commended to us by an overwhelming consensus of Christian opinion and an impressive weight of Christian experience. 'If I found that all the most musical people I knew were agreed that Beethoven's Symphonies reached the high-water mark of orchestrated music, I should not feel I was a fool if I accepted their opinion. I hope I might suspect that I was a self-opinionated prig

if I did not at least receive this verdict with respect and do my best to examine the grounds of this belief.'

And when it is thus examined reasonable grounds can be shown for this belief. We are agreed that there is a God, and that He is the Author of all good. This is a reasonable postulate, for otherwise we could not account for the goodness that is in human nature. Unless we are to suppose that man's best is higher than God, we must believe in a God of surpassing love and goodness. But love and goodness in man compel him to help the helpless, to succour the needy, to raise the fallen. The better a man is the more irresistible is this impulse. So we must conceive that God, being what He is, must be under the compulsion of His own infinite love to come to the aid of fallen man. And this He has done effectively in His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. A tremendous faith, but fully in harmony with man's highest thought of God.

When we come to examine more closely the life and teaching of Jesus Christ we get the impression of something unique. It is easy in a vague way to class Him with other great teachers of the world, but more careful and detailed investigation deepens the impression that there is none like Him. 'He stands apart in a class by Himself, unique and unrivalled.' For one thing He is always the teacher, the master, and never the inquirer. 'In all the subjects with which He is concerned He speaks as one who *knows*.' And there is something universal in His teaching and deathless in His words. They belong to every race and to every age. Spoken in the first century, they are as fresh as the day He spoke them. Moreover, there is power in them. They are 'spirit and life' as the words of no other teacher are. Many a man, sick of life, broken and helpless, has read His words, and they have healed and restored him. His words have driven men and women into action everywhere and at all times. 'Just one illustration must serve. You remember Christ's teaching about children? He took them up in His arms and blessed them. Suffer little children to come unto Me. It was because of those words that a young doctor in 1865 devoted his life to the service of friendless and homeless children.

That is how Dr. Barnardo's Homes began, through Christ's words in action.'

Of course the miraculous element in Christianity comes to the front as a supreme stumbling-block in the way of faith. At this point the critic becomes specially scornful and proudly confident. Miracles, he affirms, are violations of the laws of Nature and contrary to the findings of modern science. Such affirmations, he must be told, are based on a mechanistic view of the world which held the field for a season but is rapidly becoming antiquated. The world is no closed system or self-acting machine. If there is a living God at all He holds the world at every moment and in every part completely within His control. The realm of the unknown is so vast and the element of mystery so all-pervasive that he would be a very bold and presumptuous dogmatist who would affirm without regard to the evidence that certain events could never have happened.

A very good case can be made out for the Christian miracles, not only as an integral part of the gospel story, but as being in harmony with that kind of God, living and active, holy and loving, which the Christian faith presents. It will be found on examination that the miraculous element cannot be eliminated without tearing the gospel narrative to shreds, and that a non-miraculous version of Christianity is bloodless and ineffective. We do not believe in Christ because of the miracles, but, on the contrary, we accept the miracles because we believe in Him. If He 'spake as never man spake,' is it unreasonable to believe that He wrought deeds such as no other ever did? His whole life is the miracle, and we are not surprised to learn that mighty works were done by Him.

Above all there is the crowning miracle of the Resurrection, by which the Christian Faith stands or falls. If Christ be not risen our Faith is vain. But we rest upon the impressive witness of the Apostles and the self-authenticating power of the gospel of the Resurrection. 'The supreme argument, and one that has never been answered, is that nothing less than unmistakable evidence that their Master was truly alive could have rallied the broken and

dispirited disciples from their hopeless despair and united them into a solid body of people, fearless and determined, and ready to die for the truth to which they bore testimony. In other words, there would have been no Christian Church had there been no Easter Day.'

The Reverend H. K. ARCHDALL, M.A., Th.Soc., Principal of St. David's College, Lampeter, preached a sermon a few months ago before the University of Cambridge which is a thoughtful and timely contribution to the question of the nature of Christian Righteousness. He would have Christian people cherish no illusion as to the mental climate of our modern world on the whole question of righteousness; and he would remind them that righteousness—as Christianity understands it—has something to do with theology, that indeed it is the result of a relation with the Holy and Gracious God, who alone saves man from himself.

It is the tragedy of our modern world that men have come to think that righteousness is a matter of social arrangements which could readily be established, if only the control of social machinery could be placed in the hands of certain moral reformers. But the Christian teaching concerning righteousness is not mere morality; it is moral theology. In the Gospels and Epistles and in Christian doctrine all down the ages ethics depends upon dogmatics, and it is futile to think that Christian Righteousness can be properly expounded apart from the theological doctrines—of God and man and their relations—in which it is embedded.

The movement of our time which the preacher singles out for particular discussion is that of 'secularist humanism.' By this he understands the type of thought which, while avoiding any belief in God and Immortality, would hold on to goodness and maintain a purely this-worldly outlook. He would point out three main dilemmas facing secularist humanism, which proves its hopeless inadequacy as a basis for life.

First of all, there is the psychological dilemma of a futile optimism and a morbid despair. On

the one hand, a merely moral creed, which acknowledges no dependence upon an invisible and eternal world, produces a self-complacency which leads to the assertion of moral intuitions rather than to effective moral action. There are some among us to-day who hold that, as we are not without faults as a nation, we cannot properly assume the rôle of defenders of international morality. The result of secularist complacency is inability to act in a timely fashion and the opening up of the way to pessimism.

The second dilemma, which the preacher discusses more pointedly, is that between the claims of the individual and the claims of society. Here again no resolution can be effected on a naturalistic basis. On such a basis we are confronted with the dualism of self-expression and self-sacrifice; there is no real principle whether of individuality or of fellowship. But how is it that self-expression and self-sacrifice partially coincide in practice? How is it that we can entertain the hope of the area of their coincidence being increased? Only against the background of God and Immortality may we say that the more really human a man is, the more truly individual he will be and the more his capacity for fellowship will be developed.

The third dilemma of the secularist humanist is that he is quite unable to explain the absoluteness of either the moral obligation or the moral ideal, and thus to unite the form and the content of morality. The two aspects of moral action, action done for duty's sake and action to realize some good end, each involve a reference to the Absolute, in the one case an Absolute Imperative, in the other, an Absolute Good; and they cannot be identified or derived from each other, except through a reference to the Eternal God.

It is only then on a supernatural basis that the contradictions between optimism and pessimism, between the individual and society, between action for duty's sake and action for the realization of the good, are resolved. But the preacher dissociates himself from any theological attempt to sever eschatology from ethics in the interests of escapist religion. In other words, he argues for

an eschatology organically related to history, for the linking of moral effort to the revelation of the Divine Righteousness in the Kingdom of God. We must not be content with the shining of the True light on another shore than the confines of this dark world. 'That way lies Buddhism and not the Religion of the Incarnation.'

The problem for the Church is 'to hold on, at one and the same time, to that state of heavenly grace and perfection which is the realized Kingdom of God and to that state of moral probation which on life's various levels is our human lot, till time passes into eternity—and to find out how to make the tension between these two into a creative tension: so that in any particular moral task in history the ability to wring triumph out of tragedy and order out of chaos will be at once an expression of God's redeeming action upon us and a preparation to receive that action more adequately. Only when we run eagerly to every one of these particular moral tasks with the conviction that they have to do with God's hold upon us and our hold upon God can we avoid escapist religion.'

A concluding sentence admirably states the meaning of the whole, uniting theology, ethics, and eschatology in the conception of Christian Righteousness: 'Because social reform at its best and wisest can only create conditions of terrestrial justice and cannot of itself be ever identified with the action of the Kingdom of God, this does not prove that social reform is not necessary but only that it cannot be successful unless the material action is the sacramental expression of moral and spiritual obedience.'

In the *Congregational Quarterly* for July Dr. W. B. SELBIE has an article on 'Theology in the Modern World' which is both timely and suggestive. It may be taken for granted, he says, that our modern world has little or no use for theology. One main reason, no doubt, is the prevalence of a world-view which is summarily described as Humanism. Man sees himself as master of his fate and captain of his soul. Hence the Communist and Fascist ideologies, the worship of nation and race and the

psychological determinism which leave God out of the picture and see in religion nothing but a form of infantilism.

But there is another reason. Professor MacNeile Dixon, in his great Gifford Lectures, writes that 'a religion which is to live must be fitted into the whole system of the believer's thought, directing as well as inspiring his every decision, both public and private. It should provide him with a touchstone, a way of looking at Nature, the world and himself which harmonizes his ideas and meets his daily requirements. The principles of a man's religion (*i.e.* his theology) should be in the most intimate relation with his secular occupations and undertakings and these principles so clearly defined as to assist and support all his judgments.'

Dr. SELBIE takes this as a text, and says that if theology is at a discount to-day it is largely because it has ceased to speak to men in living tones. It is true, of course, that the central affirmations of the Christian faith remain: the revelation of God in Christ, sin, redemption, and eternal life. What we are concerned with, however, is how they can be brought home and made real to the men and women of to-day. The whole future of the Christian Church depends now on its capacity to preach the gospel committed to it in terms which will meet the needs, and appeal to the understanding, of the present generation.

There are two ways of doing this, the prophetic and the priestly, the dynamic and the static. Dr. SELBIE has no doubt as to which is the better. The prophet declares the living Word of God directly. And this suggests to Dr. SELBIE his first point in any modern presentation of the Christian faith. It is a revelation, a Word of God to man. But this conception implies something not only about God but also about man. Christian theology presupposes an anthropology, and its doctrine of man is every bit as integral to it as is its doctrine of God. It is a doctrine as far removed from the self-sufficiency of humanism as it is from the pessimism of the dialectic theology. It regards man as a child of God. He is a lost child, deeply fallen and yet capable of rising and of responding to the saving

grace of God. Man's alienation from God is a tragic reality, but it is wholly unnatural. Hence the malaise, the unrest, and the despair from which multitudes are suffering in these days, and for which the only cure is the restoration of normal relations with God.

But there is a prior question, raised by the mention of the priestly or static form of religion. It is the question of assurance or authority. We are living in difficult times and escapism is popular. People are afraid, and want above everything to feel safe. Hence the attraction of a religion of authority, of an infallible Church, or Bible, or Dogma, anything to relieve the individual of responsibility. Hence, too, the swing away from such religion on the part of intelligent young people who will have none of this infallibility. So long as theology has no better credentials than these it will make no appeal to the outside world. Those who speak in its name will have to be more candid and courageous. As Christian teachers it is essential that we should persuade men that we are out for the truth and nothing else.

Our ultimate authority is nothing less than God Himself, who is the truth and who has given to men His Spirit to lead them into all truth. Now, where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty, and we must be free to follow whithersoever the Spirit of God may lead us. But is not this liberty a dangerous thing? Who knows into what vagaries and extravagances it may lead? What criterion or guarantee have we that at any given moment we are listening to the voice of God and not to our own unconscious desires or wishful thinking? The answer is to be found in the whole modern presentation of theology. Christian theology is a theology of revelation, and therefore it must be a theology of *experience*.

But this experience is not merely subjective. There is no experience which is *merely* subjective. Every experience is a response to something or some one. It is unfortunate that the fear of subjectivity should have driven many to the opposite extreme of ignoring experience altogether. It is

argued that religion is all revelation, and that man has nothing to do with it. We must refuse this assertion. Man has everything to do with it. Religion is revelation, but it has to be received by man, and this reception is the response of his whole personality. The theology of the New Testament is a theology of experience. It is a witness given by men who found God in Christ. And our theology to-day must be of this nature—a witness to the truths by which men live.

Two conclusions follow from this. One is the folly of requiring men to give a whole-hearted assent to the ancient creeds as the condition of being accounted Christian. Dr. SELBIE admits the value of creeds. But the absolute use of them as permanent tests or standards of orthodoxy is dangerous and misleading. The Church cannot dispense with statements of doctrine, but these should not be made passports to the Christian name. What we badly need to-day is simplicity. We need only the truths of which it can be said, 'By these things men live.' These are few and comparatively simple.

The second conclusion is that theology must be more ethical and, as a consequence, less metaphysical. This is as much as to say that our theology must be more Christian. There is a great deal in some forms of orthodox theology which can by no stretch of imagination be called Christian because it is wholly inconsistent with the character of God as made known in Jesus Christ. In this connexion Dr. SELBIE makes a forcible attack on the report of the Anglican Commission on Christian Doctrine, 'a report which reveals the futility of the merely ecclesiastical approach to theological problems and the need there is for a more candid and modernized presentation of the Christian faith.' It is especially the doctrine of God as presented in this report that Dr. SELBIE criticises. It is treated more as a problem than as a gospel. The statement is too much under the influence of Jewish and pagan ideas of God, and is typical of a theological method and temper which are surely by this time obsolete. Theology will never appeal to our time if it gets away from the Spirit and simplicity that are in Christ.