

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Contemporary Commentary

A Quarterly Review of Church Affairs and Theological Trends

BY THE REV. F. J. TAYLOR, M.A.

SCIENCE AND FAITH

THE absence of any bitter controversy between men of science and men of religion in the contemporary scene can be interpreted in various ways. Some observers would conclude that religion in its classical Christian form has sustained a signal and conclusive defeat in the struggle which attracted so much interest and absorbed so much energy in the nineteenth century, and now only continues as an anomalous survival from the past. Its ultimate demise, while certain, may not occur for a considerable time, since the remnant of its devotees will fight desperate rearguard actions for many decades to come; but the high priests of science have already secured for themselves an indisputable authority in popular regard. It is believed that they have such a disinterested regard for knowledge that their pronouncements can be safely accepted as true. Other commentators point to the evidence which suggests that thoughtful scientists are themselves confused and uncertain about the significance of their work and fearful of the developments which may take place in the next few years. The autonomy of scientific thought and the freedom of scientific workers were triumphantly vindicated in the conflicts of last century. But the results of this notable victory have not been so glorious as was confidently anticipated. Many scientists are showing themselves conscious of the need to ask questions about the ultimate meaning and justification of the scientific method, and to find answers to these questions.

When the British Association for the Advancement of Science met in Edinburgh last year, its members listened to a philosophical discourse from Dr. John Baillie¹ which ought to be read, marked, learned and inwardly digested by all who care for intellectual integrity on the part both of scientists and of theologians. In the first place, Dr. Baillie argues that the problem of the bearing of science on religion, which is no new problem, is not to be understood as a relation between "the outlooks of two different men, the man of science on the one hand and the man of faith on the other, but of two elements in the total outlook of a single mind". The acuteness of the problem becomes evident when it is remembered that in the words of Professor Whitehead, "the growth of science has practically recoloured our mentality"; so that modern man who may have no more than an elementary acquaintance with physical science, shares in a certain general state of mind in the modern world which is quite different from that experienced by pre-scientific man. In that sense it would be true to assert, as Dr. Baillie does, that "we are all of us men of science". But the relation between faith and science in one mind cannot be defined in terms of a working concordant between two distinct spheres of human interest, as though

¹ *Natural Science and the Spiritual Life* (O.U.P., 1951, pp. 43, 5/-).

science dealt only with the physical world and faith only with the world of spirit. "Nowhere is it possible to draw an iron curtain across the field of our experience and proclaim either the exclusion of science from the one side or its totalitarian right on the other."

Secondly, the lecture proceeds to the reminder that modern science has been determined by the Christian doctrine of creation, which teaches that the world is contingent upon the creative will of God. The early Greek scientists were preoccupied with the search for final causes, for purpose in nature, from which when discovered it was thought possible to deduce the truth about the natural environment of human life. The prestige of Aristotle in the Christian middle ages perpetuated this attitude, so that empirical observation and experiment, so characteristic of scientific work in the last three centuries, had scarcely any place in the science of the medieval world. Bacon and Descartes liberated science from this bondage, not by the denial of final causes but by the assertion that natural science has no business with them. "We ought not to presume so far as to think ourselves sharers in the counsels of Deity." Dr. Baillie emphasizes the fact that Bacon and Descartes challenged the authority of Aristotle for a reason of faith rather than a reason of science. The Christian doctrine of creation insists that the world is a free creation of the divine will and does not assume that God had to make the world just as He did make it. There is a pattern or purpose in creation, but that purpose cannot be known in advance to the human mind. In other words, while the biblical doctrine of creation, in company with Greek scientific thought, holds fast to the intelligibility of the world, it also affirms the sovereign freedom and continuous activity of God in such a fashion as to require the use of observation and experiment on the part of scientists.

Thirdly, Dr. Baillie affirms in striking language "the vital part which the scientific temper must be allowed to play within Christian life and thought", and the need of science for a source of nourishment not in itself but in the faith that the whole process of nature is meaningful and the study of it worthwhile. It was von Hügel who insisted that the life of the spirit for its full and healthy exercise requires as its proper environment the recognition of the impersonality of nature and the autonomy of natural laws. On the other hand, "mere inquisitiveness can never be a self-sustaining attitude of mind", and the possibility of science as an authentic search for the truth of things depends upon the recognition of certain Christian virtues—humility, impartiality, self-effacement—as absolute standards, and an unquestioning devotion to truth. Such qualities only grow in a Christian soul. "Except in the context of a full humanity our science will be of little worth." This is to declare that religion cannot do without science, nor can science flourish without religious faith. The modern Christian is not faced, as his predecessors in earlier generations sometimes were, with the necessity of an intolerable choice between scientific integrity and the life of the spirit. He is summoned to follow both ways of approach to reality without any premature attempt to escape from the tension which he must inevitably experience in seeking to obey such a summons.

THE DESIGN OF GOD AND THE DISORDER OF MAN

THE Christian commentator who seeks to offer guidance to those politicians upon whom rests the responsibility of ordering our affairs and defining relationships with other nations, must tread a narrow and difficult path. If he yields to sentimentality and proclaims the sovereignty of love in terms which ignore the problem of power, his counsel will be disregarded and he himself dismissed as an ineffectual idealist. On the other hand he may draw certain precise deductions from what he chooses to regard as the principles of the Gospel, and then seek to apply them to the concrete realities of a given situation in such fashion that those who must exercise power in political decisions will regard him as guilty of so doctrinaire an approach to affairs as to be of little use to them. The problems which arise from the exercise of power are not patient of simple or speedy solutions, and there is little in traditional Christian thinking on this subject of which even the Christian statesman in the modern world can readily avail himself. Yet it is obvious to any thoughtful Christian that the word of the Gospel must be addressed to the total human situation as well as to the individual man or woman. If Jesus Christ was the Word incarnate, then that event has a universal reference both in time and space. The Bible thus discloses as in a vision the destiny of the human race and speaks of the nations bringing their glory and honour into the Holy City, which is the product not of the ingenuity of man but of the love of God.

In his recent Burge Memorial lecture,¹ Dr. C. H. Dodd has directed attention to the outlook of the writers of the New Testament who proclaim the unity of mankind before God without condemning the natural divisions and distinctions of race, language and culture which give character to human history. In the New Testament the church is regarded as a foretaste, "a kind of preliminary model on a small or imperfect scale", of the final state of mankind in the purpose of God. There is even now a Christian unity at a deeper level than all existing natural or ecclesiastical divisions. In the church is embodied "a principle which transforms society from within", in proportion as its members in any nation genuinely share in the national traditions, culture and institutions. It is this fact which makes ecumenicity both "inseparable from genuine Christianity" and a significant contribution to the cause of reconciliation between the nations. Dr. Dodd uses the evidence of the Epistle to the Ephesians to define the way in which the New Testament demonstrates the method and meaning of reconciliation between two such deeply divided peoples as Jews and Greeks. In the Christian community, the body of Christ, members of the two hostile races abandoned their claims to moral superiority and exclusive privilege and found a oneness which was not the result of elaborate political machinery but of the creation of a new humanity through the operation of the indwelling Spirit of Christ. Justification by faith is a truth by which national communities are to live, as well as a saving truth for individuals, since it is all too evident "that self-

¹ *Christianity and the Reconciliation of the Nations* (S.C.M. Press, 1952, pp. 29, 3/6).

righteousness is the bane of international relations " in the present age. It is at this deep level that the reconciliation of the nations can alone become possible and a genuine international community come into existence. Genuine ecumenicity is thus not only a Christian concern but an effectual sign of the reconciliation of the nations.

THE PATTERN OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

IT is a sufficiently familiar proposition to assert that the effectiveness of the Christian mission in any environment is in proportion to the demonstration given in the life of the Christian community of the transforming power of the Gospel. The words of St. Theresa have been quoted so frequently as to lose much of their dramatic force : " Christ has now no other hands but our hands, no other feet but our feet : ours are the eyes with which He looks out in compassion on the world ". Yet it is evident that the truth embodied in such language should impel modern Christians to a greater concern with the pattern of their common life in the church. It is this fact that makes the pioneering activity of the Iona Community and other similar Christian groups so important in our day. They have grasped the necessity laid upon the church in the middle of the twentieth century of answering by deeds the question, How should Christians be trying to live in the contemporary world? A member of the Iona Community has recently defined the issue in these terms. " The future of the church does not depend on the rightness of our theology nor our own understanding of the contemporary situation. These are of course important. But the one essential on which the immediate future of the church depends is the awareness of its members that they are an instrument in God's hands and their readiness to see that they are fit."¹

It is the church as it ought to be in the will of God, rather than the church as it has been or as it now is, with which we are to be concerned. Most thoughtful people would agree that modern western civilization has, within the short space of a century, brought greater changes in the accepted way of life than many centuries of growth had previously achieved.² The impact of these changes has been felt most acutely in those realms of life which are commonly regarded as normal and unchanging : family life, means of livelihood and social relationships. The Christian community is not obliged to endorse all these changes in admitting that it can neither be indifferent to them nor unaffected by them. It is impossible as well as undesirable to turn the clock back, so that the task of the church is not to regret the disappearance of some pattern of the past, still less to attempt to preserve it, but to seek the pattern which will, with the least inadequacy, manifest the concrete meaning of Christian obedience in the world as it is.

The most rapid survey of Christian history will convince the enquirer that the pattern of Christian living has undergone constant change as the circumstances of political and social life have changed. The monastic movement, which in its earliest period was a form of Christian social living, adapted to the needs of the age and pioneered by a

¹ *The Household of Faith*, by T. R. Morton (Iona Community, 1951, 6/6), p. 9.

² *English Social History*, by G. M. Trevelyan, p. 97.

courageous minority, became at a later period a fixed order which endeavoured with diminishing success to press new developments into outworn moulds until the unity of Christendom itself was broken. Again, "what Wesley and his successors of all denominations did was to make the Christian domestic virtues which belonged to a rural economy, rule in the homes of those who belonged to a new world of industry and commerce. They brought a new moral rectitude . . . among the members of the new middle classes . . . a rectitude which did not seriously question the economic basis of society".¹ Attention was given to the ways in which a man spent his money, but little critical scrutiny was directed against the methods by which he had made it. The consequence was that the nineteenth century church in Britain was predominantly middle class in its membership, teaching and activity; so that the industrial classes have never lapsed from it since they have never been at home in it.

The nineteenth century was also the era in which the foreign missionary enterprise was developed on a considerable scale, with first Britain and then America as the base from which men and supplies were despatched into all the world. But the question has to be faced whether the church unconsciously turned to work abroad because it could do little at home through its inability to enter the world of the proletariat. It may be that the church found it "easier to preach the Gospel to men who were in the primitive rural economy in which the church itself had developed and to which its life was more easily adapted than to those living in the new conditions of industrial life."² Mr. Morton advances to an analysis of the principal features in the pattern of overseas missionary work at its best—the equality of women, a genuine comradeship of all vocations, freedom from economic rivalry and freedom from national and racial barriers. These were the very things in which the church at home had experienced so miserable a failure, often without being aware of this failure. The problem of finding the Christian pattern for a post-industrial age cannot be solved if it is treated as a British or American problem. The church has to learn about itself from the church abroad before it can see the outlines of the pattern needed at home.

The need of the hour is the discovery of a new pattern of Christian social living, a pattern which "does not regard all that is happening in the world as the apostacy of man or the work of the devil", nor supposes that the whole duty of Christianity is expressed in the effort "to preserve isolated communities in the midst of an alien world".³ It must be a pattern which reckons seriously with the realities of the contemporary situation, unaffected by nostalgia for a past gone beyond recall. Such a new pattern must be based upon a resolute determination to treat men and women equally as persons, to show concern for all their activities and to preserve a genuine measure of freedom of choice expressed in a voluntary economic discipline. It is upon these elements, in a pattern more adequate to the requirements of the time, that the missionary experience of the modern church must exercise a

¹ Morton, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

² *ibid.*, p. 75.

³ *ibid.*, p. 104.

profound influence. If the age of pioneers into unknown territory is now passed, there is room and to spare for pioneers in the untrodden ways of Christian community living in a scientific and industrial order.

WARNING AND EXAMPLE

SINCE the union in 1929 of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church, Scotland has achieved a measure of Christian unity which is hardly paralleled in any other part of the English speaking world. It is true that the reunion of divided Presbyterian groups, though difficult to accomplish by reason of human frailty, did not have to overcome the stubborn difficulties which confront those who speak to each other across the deep divisions created by great differences in order and liturgy. Nevertheless it is probable that experience of reunion and of the long and arduous negotiations which inevitably preceded the restoration of a lost unity, has warnings to offer as well as encouragement to afford to other Christian communions seeking the way of unity. Professor G. D. Henderson of Aberdeen has recently made the claim that the Church in Scotland has achieved "a degree of unity that is of special interest and value and particularly important for its unusual comprehensiveness".¹ His essay presents a number of issues which merit the attention of considering churchmen.

When Anglicans and Presbyterians meet to examine their differences, it is evident that the community of interest between the two national churches of England and Scotland is more than outweighed for the majority of their members by the difference of church order. If the battle cries of parity and prelacy are no longer uttered as loudly as in earlier times, it still remains true that little progress can be achieved in church relations until this formidable barrier has been removed. Professor Henderson has performed a useful service in reminding Anglicans that the historic attitude in Scotland arose not from a fundamental objection to episcopacy, but through the attempts to enforce it from without by civil enactments. "Episcopacy in Scottish experience meant state control of religion, and that the people simply would not have." The vehement and wordy pamphlets which were poured out in the seventeenth century to prove presbyterianism the only scriptural form of church order were protests against a detested practice and the rationalization of an accepted order. John Knox had no objection to the use of the Lord's Prayer in public worship, but "a hundred years after his time the excited imagination of simple folk saw even here a needle to draw in the episcopalian if not the papal thread". The poverty stricken public worship of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the result of an "entire detestation of popery", very understandable, if also regrettable. It was a revolt rather than a reform. The warning conveyed by this melancholy page of ecclesiastical history would seem to be clear. There is much in the attitude and procedure of those who have appropriated to themselves the title of 'catholic' which is responsible for the continuing disunity in Christendom. Injudicious language and unwise

¹ "Scotland's Contribution to Unity" in *Church Quarterly Review* (No. 306, Vol. cliii, Jan.-Mar., 1952), pp. 35-47.

action on the part of the Tractarians and their successors in England provoked a grievous distortion of the authentic evangelical witness in the Church of England. It is hardly too much to claim that the Church of England does not find to-day a strong episcopal church as its partner in Scotland, because of the arrogance and folly of English civil and ecclesiastical interference in Scottish affairs in the seventeenth century. Resistance to such interference required unyielding opposition to episcopacy. Opposition to episcopacy led to that typically ecclesiastical form of self-justification, an exclusive claim for a national church order as of divine right. Accidents of history thus contribute to the "hardening and canonization of a system to which men have grown accustomed, so that it becomes very difficult to get free from the entail of such history".

In Scotland, divisive tendencies showed themselves not as in England, in conflicts between different confessional allegiances, but in mutually exclusive interpretations of the relationship which ought to prevail between an accepted Presbyterian order and the state or the general community of the nation. Evangelical zeal produced a temper in which only those who had "closed with Christ" in a certain way could be accepted as among the number of the elect, until in the early decades of the nineteenth century there were seven parallel presbyterian religious bodies in Scotland, "on terms of mutual excommunication". This unhappy development was part of that movement which still divides Christendom between denominations which are 'multitudinous' and those which are 'gathered': or to use the more familiar language of Troeltsch, between the church and the sect type of religious community. The particular importance of the Christian reunion which has so far been accomplished in Scotland, is that it has emerged from a conviction of the need for the witness of both emphases within one ecclesiastical fellowship. Those who value the national mission of the church and its recognition by the state need to be aware of the dangers of political control, the injustice of privilege and the complacency of an established order. The witness of the gathered church must be supplemented by the realization that a church cannot live apart from society and that the tone of public life can only be sustained by an explicit recognition of Christianity.

Thus the distinction between church and sect, apparently so deep, has turned out to be one of degree and not of kind, and "the true Israel is plainly always in process of cultivation within the wider Israel of God". The truth is that the distinctive witness of a group with a particular concern, if it is given in isolation from the whole Christian fellowship or over against the witness of other groups, becomes distorted or even perverted. It can only be of lasting service to the Christian cause when it is given by those who are prepared to face the tension, often painful though creative, which arises from sharing a common life in one household with others who speak in different accents and are concerned to emphasize very different insights. The reunited Church of Scotland may under God thus point the way to that growth into unity which is the calling of the whole church, even more effectually than the Church of England can.

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

ONE of the 'concerns' which was discussed at the first assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948 was the life and work of women in the church. The amount of material which had been communicated by the member churches was so great that the assembly could only receive a short provisional report. The work of producing a fuller report which should present an adequate selection of the material and an interpretation of the situation revealed in the great mass of varied evidence was entrusted to Dr. Kathleen Bliss. This fuller report has now appeared¹ and undoubtedly merits the judgment of Dr. Visser T'Hooft, the general secretary of the World Council, that it is a "highly illuminating survey of the place and work of women in many churches".² It is not and cannot pretend to be a definitive report. Such a document would have to be on a very much larger scale and would require far greater resources to prepare than are at present available. But it does give a balanced picture of what is happening, of the present situation of women in society and of the problems which must be faced. Brief but penetrating surveys of the status of women in the church and of the work open to them are offered to the reader under the headings of voluntary service, full-time and professional service, the ordained ministry, and participation in the government of the church.

Perhaps the most significant thing about the report and its genesis is that it should ever have been thought necessary to conduct such an investigation. It seems to suggest, despite the preponderance of women in the membership of most churches, that the normal church member is a man and that there is something a little uncertain about female membership and still more puzzling about responsible service in the church on the part of women, except in certain well worn but restricted paths. If a parallel document were to be produced on the service and status of men in the churches, the oddity of the whole proceeding would be more apparent.

This discussion leads up to a serious reckoning with the question whether at this critical moment of history in a distracted world, the gifts and willingness of women are being used to the best advantage by the churches. Are the churches helping women, married or unmarried, to play a full and responsible part in modern life as Christians and women? Have the churches understood the significance of the revolutionary change in the place of women in society which has taken place in the last half century? So far only a few secular writers appear to have set themselves to understand this revolution. Yet there is great need for what Dr. Bliss calls "prophetic imaginative writing" on this theme from Christian sources, for one of the reports which she quotes remarks that "the patriarchal conception of the relation of men and women is even stronger in parsonages than it is among the people generally". The advent of the technical society

Concluded on page 128

¹ *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*, by Kathleen Bliss (S.C.M. Press, pp. 208, 12/6).

² *op. cit.*, p. 9.