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The New Attitude to God.

BY THE REVEREND W. B. SELBIE, D.D., PRINCIPAL OF MANSFIELD COLLEGE, OXFORD.

ONE of the most common complaints against theology is that it is remote from reality. Men look upon it as a thing of the schools, a collection of doctrines and formulas that are to be accepted rather than understood, and that have no sort of relation to the world of actual things around them. And the mistake—for mistake of the most tragic kind it is—is not without justification. There are dead theologies enough, but even these are monuments of what was once alive. The history of religious thought is strewn with such memorials, yet they should serve to remind the inquirer of the living faith which they once enshrined. As a matter of simple fact, theology is, of all forms of human speculation, the most sensitive to environment. The changes in man's idea of God, and in the forms in which he has expressed it, have been brought about, not by wanton exercise of the imagination, but by the impact of circumstances. They have been necessitated by that relation between idea and actuality, the very existence of which is often so lightly denied. The process may be traced, for example, in the development of the idea of God in Israel, a development which is quite unintelligible unless we reckon with the influence of the varying fortunes of the people on their conception of Jehovah and His relation to them. True, it needed prophets and psalmists to put the thing into words, and drive it home on the national consciousness. But their work was rendered possible only by events such as the Assyrian invasion and the Babylonian captivity. The same process may be seen at work in the early Church, as witness the Apocalypse and the Pauline letters, and in great restatements of Christian theology, such as took place at Nicæa and in the course of the Protestant Reformation. The common feature in all such cases is the demand for a new interpretation of God and His ways, forced on men by their experiences, and called forth to meet an actual need. That the restatements thus evoked should in time lose their relevance and become stereotyped goes without saying. When they are regarded as final and definitive, and are imposed on men's minds as the last word on the subject, they become a grievous burden and hindrance to the truth.

Some men, no doubt, love to have it so, and are content to enclose themselves in a hard shell of dogma and tradition. Their motto in intellectual as in other things is 'safety first.' On the other hand, there are always to be found men of another stamp, prophets and pioneers, who believe that 'where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty,' and that God has not ceased to reveal Himself to men. These are ready to follow the truth wherever it may lead them. Such men have their opportunity in great crises of the world's history. So at a time like the present, when everything is in the melting-pot, there is a felt need for a frank restatement of theology, and for a candid attempt to Christianize the idea of God.

It is often remarked that the war has only accentuated tendencies of thought and action which were already making themselves felt. This is certainly true in the sphere of religion and theology. There the experiences of the last five years have revealed the need for a new theology, and for a re-reading of the idea of God in terms of the life, work, and Person of Jesus Christ. These requirements, however, are not new, though they have been greatly emphasized. For some time past men have been thinking along these lines, and it will probably appear that the effect of the war has been simply to crystallize a good deal that was already held in solution.

The Christian idea of God, then, has generally contained at least three elements: (1) A conception of God as Personal Providence, the creator and sustainer of the Universe, derived from Jewish sources; (2) a Greek element regarding God as the Absolute, the home of all relations and the underlying unity of things; (3) the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. How to reconcile and relate these varied elements has been the problem of speculative theology, and the results have naturally differed according to the stress laid on one or other of them. The issue for the average man has been a rather bare kind of theism, without either warmth or life, and singularly devoid of any distinctively Christian traits. It has broken down under stress of the war, and there is now a genuine demand for something more real and vital. The

difficulty is popularly expressed in the dilemma—If God is omnipotent He is not good, and if He is good He cannot be omnipotent. It is not surprising that a solution should have been found acceptable to many in the idea of a struggling, suffering Deity, entangled in His own Universe, and working through it towards a 'best that is yet to be.' Unsatisfactory as this is, it yet contains certain Christian elements, and constitutes a challenge to Christian theology for an ampler and truer restatement of the doctrine of God.

The demand for such restatement is generally accompanied by a confession of scepticism regarding metaphysical theories or proofs of the being of God. The classical objection to these is on the ground that they do not arise out of, or find any place in, Christian experience. Their value, such as it is, is for philosophy rather than for religion. Something warmer, more real and more vital, is needed than a metaphysical theory. This position is reasonable enough up to a point. By all means let us begin with the idea of God given in Christian history and experience. But we have still to ask whether the idea will work, and that involves the attempt to justify it on philosophical and other grounds. The pragmatic test can never be sufficient by itself, and value is not a substitute for truth. It would help matters if modern theology were less shy of the idea of revelation than it has sometimes been in the past. Our datum then is, 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' It is admitted that in Jesus we have a unique consciousness of God, derived ultimately from His own experience, though expressed in terms familiar to the men of His day. He filled the name 'Father' with a new content, and, in the light of it, restated God's relations to the world and to men in terms of the kingdom of heaven. If we judge of His teaching by the spirit of the whole rather than by the letter of any individual sayings, we see that this conception of God involves personality, power, and love or grace. If it be of the pith of the Christian revelation to assert that God is Love, then love is only possible to a person, and love without power to further its aims were a meaningless mockery. God is thus known in His relations to the Universe and to mankind, and He must be so known first before we can form any conclusions as to what He is in Himself. For this reason it was that Jesus taught men to begin with faith as the best avenue to knowledge. He would not

have us know God by some process of reason first in order that we may serve Him. He tells us that we must be willing to do His will in order to know. We are not asked for any logically compelling proofs of God and His ways. The appeal is rather to faith in the interests of a religious experience satisfying not merely to the intellect but to the whole man. We are dealing here with a conception of the universe which is dynamic rather than static, and with a religion whose finality consists in 'nothing else than in its endless capacity of growth and self-renewal.' It is exactly this that the modern mind is groping after—a God who is not simply and sufficiently expressed in abstract terms as the Absolute, and therefore out of all intelligible relation with the Universe, but one who, Himself personal and living, can come into touch with persons who find their complete life only in Him.

It is, then, on the basis of this personal relationship of God with His creatures that Christian theology must be built up. That complete trust in the Heavenly Father's goodness and utter devotion to His will which was characteristic of the religion of Jesus Himself becomes the norm for His followers, and the experimental ground of their interpretation of God. There is nothing more arid in the older theologies than the discussion of the Divine attributes. This was due to the fact that the subject never escaped from the region of the abstract and the philosophical. Had it started always from the New Testament, and continued on the lines there laid down, the result would have been very different. God's love, for example, can never be regarded as mere emotion. It is active and living, the regulative principle and moving impulse in all His works. It inspires His creation of man as a free being, capable of rising to great heights in response to its appeal, but capable also of depths of sin and infamy in response to lower appeals. But to love it were always a greater thing to create man so than to produce a puppet incapable of freedom and always under rule. From this follows the conception of the world as the arena of man's spiritual struggle, and the means by which he is exercised unto perfection. This love, too, is one that 'will not let go.' God's purpose for man is one of redemption. It is not His will that one of His little ones should perish. So He hath never left Himself without witness, and in the fulness of the times He sent His son into the world that the world

through Him might be saved. 'God commendeth his love towards us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.' The coming of Jesus Christ was no mere accident, but part of the age-long purpose of God towards His creatures. It is the Father's good pleasure to give men the Kingdom, to establish His rule among them in love, joy, and peace. Towards this end the whole of organized Christianity works, and it will be judged by the measure of its success in attaining it.

The work of Jesus Christ completes and emphasizes His teaching concerning God. By His life and death is determined the character of the redemption which He came into the world to mediate to man. As of old He still convinces the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment to come. Therefore, Christian theology has to reckon with His relation to God on the one hand, and to man on the other. It is not enough to set Him forth as the supreme example for men, or to declare that He has for them the religious value of God. It is in Him that men know God, and in communion with Him they become partakers of the Divine nature. On this whole subject there is much confusion of thought even among Christians, due to the prevalence of the tendency to draw sharp ethical distinctions between God and Jesus Christ. It is here that the demand for a Christianized theology becomes insistent. Only as we know God in Christ can we interpret aright His nature and His intentions towards mankind. The revelation in Christ does not mark, as it were, a change in the Divine policy. It is the fulfilment of an age-long purpose, and is consistent with a Divine nature hitherto but dimly and partially apprehended. But in these terms, again, the Christian faith is dynamic rather than static; not a fixed quantity or a final word so much as a process into which men enter by degrees, and the end of which is not yet. Therefore our apprehension of God in Christ is, and must be, conditioned by our mental outlook and experiences. Christianity is an historical creed rather than a philosophical system, and as such is the more readily adaptable to the varying needs of men.

At the same time men cannot escape from the necessity laid upon them by their own natures to give some reasoned account of the nature and work of the God so revealed in Jesus Christ. Granted that the appeal of the revelation is to the whole nature of man, is made good in experience, and responded to by obedience and faith, this does not

absolve us from the duty of thinking things through and thinking them together. The long mental and spiritual struggles which culminated in the great creeds of Christendom accomplished this for the ancient world, and have set up certain clear signposts for the men of to-day. But, as we have already seen, the work was carried out always under conditions provided by the mentality of each several age, and needs to be continually restated. The modern mind may not be interested in orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, but is quite capable of recognizing the dangers of the popular tritheism to which this generally descends. It recognizes that a metaphysical Trinity is not given in Christian experience. It seeks for a God who is one, personal, living, loving, and active. Such a God is not to be found in some wholly transcendent being, whose unity spells isolation and importance. Therefore there is still room for a conception of Deity within whose unity relations are possible, and who may be described in social rather than individual terms. Modern investigations into the nature of personality make this at least a tenable hypothesis. If God's relations to the universe take the forms indicated by the terms Father, Son, and Spirit, then there is something in the nature of God corresponding to these. Christian experience cannot be satisfied with anything less than this. It demands a conception of God sufficiently rich and full to account for the great salvation mediated to the world through His Son Jesus Christ.

Modern Christianity, therefore, can never be content with a doctrine of God that insists on the acceptance of ancient formulas as they stand, or is content simply to restate them in more intelligible terms. It recognizes that there can be no finality in theology; and seeks a conception of God big enough to meet the ever-growing needs of human experience and knowledge. Men are beginning to realize that 'God has put eternity into their hearts,' and that it is only *sub specie eternitatis* that they can attain that knowledge of Him which is life. The call for a more real expression of religion in life which has become so insistent of recent years, has its counterpart in the demand for a living God who does things, and whose power is available for the least of His creatures. Once their religious needs have been awakened men will never again acquiesce in the notion that God is the sole possession of any ecclesiastical institution, or that He can be approached only through duly appointed

human intermediaries. Almost without knowing it they believe that the grace of God is free, and that the Spirit of God 'bloweth where it listeth.' There is a great opportunity here for preaching with new emphasis the gospel of the grace of God, and for setting forth Him whom men still ignorantly worship as He reveals Himself in providential care, moral discipline, and redemptive passion. The men of to-day will never be content with an easy religion, with 'a god of things as they are.' They can best be appealed to by the prospect of adventure, and the call to heroism and self-sacrifice will not fall on deaf ears. The God they seek must be one who not only supplies all their needs, but claims them as fellow-workers in the great task of re-establishing His Kingdom on the earth. Such

an one they find in the God who was 'in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself,' and 'in whose service there is perfect freedom.' Their aim is thus religious and practical in the first instance, and cannot be better expressed than in the words of Mr. Balfour in the beginning of his Gifford Lectures, 'When I speak of God, I mean something more than an identity wherein all differences vanish, or a unity which includes, but does not transcend, the differences which somehow it holds in solution. I mean a God whom men can love, to whom men can pray, who takes sides, who has purposes and preferences, whose attributes, however conceived, leave unimpaired the possibility of a personal relation between Himself and those whom He has created.'

Literature.

SAMUEL BUTLER.

It would be a pity, a very great pity, if those who read the first volume of *Samuel Butler, Author of 'Erewhon' (1835-1902): A Memoir*, by Mr. Henry Festing Jones (Macmillan; 42s. net), were too weary with it to proceed to the second. It is a volume of 478 pages (including the Preface), most of them in small type, and (to characterize it generally) when it is not dull it is disappointing. Butler, we are told, was a man of exceptional ability; all we see is exceptional versatility. He tries many things—theology, photography, music, teaching, ranching, painting, poetry, science—and fails in every one of them. His only success is in the making of enemies. He quarrels with all his own folk at home. He quarrels with religious folk everywhere. He quarrels with scientific folk wherever he can get them to look at him. We are near the end of the volume when we read: 'I am quite ready to admit that I am in a conspiracy of one against men of science in general, with an extra slouch of the hat for Mr. Grant Allen in particular.'

The dullness of the book is due partly, perhaps chiefly, to the letters of Miss Savage, a lady who, the biographer informs us, wished to marry Butler, but had to recognize at last that he did not wish to marry her. He encouraged her to write to him,

and her long uninteresting letters occupy nearly a fourth part of the volume. Not once have we found a memorable or a kindly sentence in them. There is plenty of clever flippancy, even blasphemy if you choose to call it so, for when a woman openly goes in for irreligion she becomes as hopeless as one who secretly goes in for drink. Butler himself broke with Christianity, or rather with Christian people, but he never became irreligious. What made him encourage Miss Savage was simply the fact that she appreciated him, and did so with an abandon that satisfied even his sensitiveness. We shall not quote any of her references to divine things, but this is a flattering example of her way with human beings: '4 Dec. 1880—Apropos of odious creatures, I saw Mr. Gladstone last week. He came out of Lord Selborne's house in Portland Place. He was looking dreadfully cross and very yellow. He seemed undecided as to where he should cross the street, and he stared at me in a helpless sort of way as if he expected me to offer him some advice on the matter; but, as there was no possibility of putting him in the way of being run over, I refrained from giving an opinion. The crossings about Portland Place are so stupidly safe.'

A little of that may be entertaining, but nearly a hundred pages of it in the smallest type! And then there are Butler's replies, perhaps half as