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Contemporary Commentary

A Quarterly Review of Church Affairs and Theological Trends

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

A TRACT FOR THE TIMES

DR. CHARLES RAVEN has long been known for his skilful and persistent advocacy of the religious importance of science to Christian believers, and in a notable series of Gifford Lectures¹ he has lately pursued this crusade a stage further. The lectures so far published, offer a brilliant survey of the relations between religion and science from the beginning of the Christian era to the middle of the twentieth century, a survey which is not only in itself a fascinating historical record but also the presentation of an impressive body of evidence upon which certain important contentions are based. No would-be theologian should allow himself to remain in ignorance of the history of the origins and growth of natural science which are so persuasively narrated in these pages. No preacher should presume to offer guidance to his congregation on the challenge which science presents to religion until he has acquired such a sympathetic understanding of the achievements and disciplines of science as can be derived from a mastery of those chapters. It is always a temptation to say of each new book of importance that no educated person can afford to miss it. But this volume takes its place at once among the select company of modern books which ought to be compulsory reading for every ordinand. There are indeed few passages in it which would be beyond the grasp of the ordinary Christian reader who, being persuaded of the importance of the theme, would be ready to give close attention to its perusal. He would find himself informed, stimulated, provoked, challenged, but above all illumined by many penetrating observations. The theologians are justly belaboured for their many deficiencies, but scientists do not escape castigation where in the judgment of the author it is deserved. It is this quality which gives to the book the flavour of a tract for the times as well as the aspect of a serious contribution to scientific and theological history.

Three particular comments may be allowed. First, the thesis is proclaimed that Christian belief in the Word made flesh commits believers to a profound appreciation of the value and importance of the physical realm and "makes Christianity the most materialistic of the world's great religions".² The Incarnation is thus the very charter of scientific research and reasoning. There is nothing novel in this contention, yet Christian history discloses how difficult it is for believers in various ages and in differing cultural circumstances to hold firmly to this assertion of faith and to allow its full consequences.

¹ *Natural Religion and Christian Theology: The Gifford Lectures 1951. First Series: Science and Religion.* By C. E. Raven (Camb. Univ. Press, 1953, pp. 224. 21/-).

² *ibid* p. 12.

Some of the earlier pioneers of western science—the new apostolic succession of Gesner, Cudworth, Ray, Linnaeus, Kingsley, Darwin and Hort which Dr. Raven sets against the generally received succession of Copernicus, Kepler, Bruno, Galileo, Descartes and Newton—were men of piety, but all too often theologians have been guilty of the disparagement of science to the glory of God, and of playing down the natural order in comparison with the supernatural realm ; of this world of experience in time and space in favour of the world to come. This is, so Dr. Raven holds, both an improper and a dangerous proceeding. It is improper because it denies the good news about nature as the handiwork of God, witnessed in the Bible ; it is dangerous, because it sets up an iron curtain, fashioned of ignorance, misunderstanding and contempt, between theologians and scientists.

Secondly, this understanding of nature requires us to take with the utmost seriousness the unity of the divine working in nature and grace, in science and history, in the world and in the church. It is in the Word made flesh that nature and grace are perfectly conjoined by the very act of God. " But if the whole process of nature and history is continuous, then it is appropriate to interpret it continuously and in terms suited to its fullest development ".¹ So it follows that the problems of the scientist and the theologian are not greatly dissimilar. " To form the habit of surveying subjects like love and power, evil and pain, from the double standpoints both of the study of the universe and of the records of Christ is to discover how each illuminates and is illuminated by the other."² This is a way of understanding the purposes of God in and for the world, which is not to be regarded as a work of supererogation for the few, but a method which cannot be ignored by the Christian thinker without disobedience to the true nature of his calling. Theology has suffered and still suffers from its neglect of the witness of the natural order.

Thirdly, Dr. Raven considers that just when a synthesis was becoming possible, " Christians who were surely committed to the integration of experience and of life seemed to be retiring into their own ivory towers, cells and catacombs, . . . the old antitheses were reaffirmed ; the old dualisms revived ".³ The contemporary theological revival, so much praised in other quarters, is here arraigned on the charge of putting such a divorce between nature and supernature as to be virtually guilty of the Arian heresy of dividing the Creator from the Redeemer and making them beings of different substances. Here perhaps more than anywhere else Dr. Raven reveals some serious chinks in his armour. He plainly lacks sympathy with the theological movement of the last twenty years, though in a detached note⁴ he makes a more discriminating and generous estimate of the work and influence of Barth than he had previously allowed, acknowledging in Barth's more recent utterances " breadth as well as depth and a sense of proportion quite absent in his first writings ". Nevertheless Raven goes a long way towards making out his case against modern theology for its failure to respond to the approaches which have come from science in these desperate years. For him the issue comes to a head in the crisis of the atom bomb. " Unfortunately the churches were no longer ready

¹ *ibid* p. 17² *ibid* p. 15³ *ibid* p. 202⁴ *ibid* pp. 212-215

to respond. Commissions were set up, but no effort was made to get scientists to join them; reports were issued which expressed nothing but bewilderment: on an issue on which Abraham had had no hesitation, Christendom seemed to have nothing to say. All of us who profess and call ourselves Christians stand together under that condemnation."¹ This is a challenge which can by no means be either refused or evaded. It declares a theological responsibility which, however burdensome, must be discharged.

THE PRIMARY UNIT OF MISSION

THE word 'parish', which is the English rendering of a Greek term signifying a neighbourhood, early gained for itself an important place in the Christian vocabulary. In the first Christian centuries the word was used to describe the community of people who shared a common life in Christ and not the geographical area which they occupied. This emphasis upon the personal meaning of a word which in this country is so rich in historical and legal associations has recently been given an authoritative exposition by Canon G. W. O. Addleshaw.² The unity of the parish was expressed and safeguarded in the spiritual rule of the bishop, under whose direction the subordinate clergy assisted in the governance of the flock. The progress of the Christian mission in the fourth and fifth centuries was consolidated by the erection of primitive churches in the larger villages outside the city centres, so that the word parish came to be applied as well to churches in the country as to the whole community in the city. But there was no attempt to divide up the territory of the city into geographical areas, each with its own church, or to build churches for each centre of population. The country churches were staffed by clergy under the supervision of the city bishop. Visitations by bishops and synods in the city (to which country clergy were summoned to receive their instructions) were institutions designed to maintain the unity of the clergy round their bishop. In Anglo-Saxon England, within each diocese established by Theodore mission, stations called 'minsters' were brought into existence as agencies for the evangelistic and pastoral work of the church. But such parishes contained many centres of population and had no acknowledged boundaries. It was Bede who in 734 urged upon Egbert, the first Archbishop of York, the need for every village to receive the direct care of a resident priest. Such a parochial system with its emphasis upon the community of place "did not finally come into existence till nearly four centuries after this letter. But to Bede belongs the honour of being the first Englishman to realize its necessity".³

OUT OF THE LABYRINTH OF SEPARATION

THE phrase which stands at the head of this note is taken from the text of a sermon preached before the University of Cambridge on 10 May, 1953 by Dr. G. L. Prestige, Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral,

¹ *ibid* p. 203

² *The Beginnings of the Parochial System*, G. W. O. Addleshaw (St. Anthony's Press, London, 1953, pp. 16. 2/6).

³ *ibid* p. 15.

upon the subject of the gift of bishopric.¹ Recalling that it was from the same pulpit that the Archbishop of Canterbury, some six and a half years previously, had proposed the acceptance of episcopacy by the English Free Churches as a step towards "the free and unfettered exchange of life in worship and sacrament", the preacher confessed that he stood before his congregation "as an urgent advocate of the Archbishop's proposal that the Free Churches should consider taking it into their own systems".² The language he allowed himself to employ is significant, for as the opening paragraphs of the sermon acknowledge, the original proposal, though it commanded widespread attention, was not received with any very marked signs of enthusiasm. This sermon, noting that a survey of the contemporary ecclesiastical scene reveals a wide area of agreement amongst Christians of separated traditions to which great regard must be given, proceeds, in the light of a frank avowal of Anglican convictions, to a careful examination of the theological implications of such a giving and receiving of episcopacy.

Four issues of some importance to which attention ought to be given by considering churchmen were raised in the course of the sermon. In the first place, Dr. Prestige granted that "it is hardly possible to deny that they [comprehensive organized churches] are all churches in some sense", but added that the question which troubles many Anglicans is whether they are all churches in the same sense.³ If it can be said that there is widespread agreement nowadays that the biblical witness to the church obliges Christians to hold that the church was designedly founded to be a visible community in the world, are they not also obliged to conclude that when God wills the end, He wills the means also? Is there a will and ordinance of God for the corporate life of the whole Christian people, or is this important question to be decided solely by historical accident and human preference? Beyond all question, the shape of church life does exercise a profound influence on the spirituality, Christian understanding and zeal of church members, so that it is difficult to believe that it can be treated as a matter of indifference. Anglicans believe that there is a pattern of right order for the life of the church and that episcopacy—which has been preserved to them—is a vital element in this pattern. No doubt they will be hesitant in pronouncing judgment upon those who lack this element in their corporate life, but very ready to affirm its positive importance. Professor Leonard Hodgson has recently emphasized how erroneous it would be to suppose that a tenacious attachment to episcopacy and to episcopal succession is only to be found amongst "a small group described as 'extreme Anglo-Catholics', whose views can be safely ignored in making plans for the reunion of Christendom. Such an attitude I believe to be profoundly mistaken. Respect for the doctrine of apostolic succession is far more widely diffused among us and deeply ingrained in us than that. It characterizes our history, as shown in the lives of such men as Timothy Cutler and Samuel Seabury. . . . The actual steps taken by the Church of England in recent years towards the restoration of inter-communion with other bodies have all kept in view the satisfaction of

¹ *The Gift of Bishopric*, by G. L. Prestige (S.P.C.K., 1953, pp. 16, 2/6).

² *ibid.*, p. 15. ³ *ibid.*, p. 13.

what the doctrine requires".¹ There can be no doubt that when Dr. Prestige suggests that Anglicans believe that episcopacy is a divinely given element in the life of the church which cannot be surrendered, he has behind him the great weight both of authoritative precedent and of contemporary Anglican opinion.

In the second place, "some sort of appreciation of spiritual value in episcopacy is a pre-condition equally of its honest offer and of its honest acceptance".² Most Anglicans would be as ready to endorse this statement as they are to deplore any unseemly bargaining about episcopacy as a kind of stubborn ecclesiastical barrier which must be surmounted with the least possible trouble. Those Anglicans who insist that episcopacy cannot rightly be offered or accepted without some agreed doctrinal understanding of it, are contending for the same point. The Free Churches cannot be asked to disavow their non-episcopal or even anti-episcopal past and accept an ecclesiastical ordinance unless they can be given reason to believe that episcopacy is part of the divine ordering of the church and that without it they lack, in the language of the seventeenth century, "the integrity or perfection of a church".³ It must be acknowledged that they will not easily be convinced of this claim but the attempt cannot be shirked.⁴ For their part, Free Churchmen must be asked to examine their presuppositions and prejudices and to declare their present mind on episcopacy: whether it is a true gift of God to the church or a mere human delusion. Meanwhile a particular responsibility rests on evangelical Anglicans to determine the sense in which they understand episcopacy and its essential place in the life of the church.

The third issue emerges from the difficulty of defining the precise form of the gift proposed. "What is being offered," says Dr. Prestige, "is the thing itself".⁵ But is it possible to separate the thing itself from its trappings? Episcopacy can only be known from the forms which it has assumed at various moments in the history of the church. The free churches, it is said, are not being invited to accept episcopacy in "its specifically and exclusively Anglican shape . . . we might as reasonably urge them to adopt for universal practice the distinctive forms of Anglican cathedral worship, the attempted imitation of which imposes so intolerable a burden on many of our own parishes".¹ The hope is expressed that the process of giving and receiving of episcopacy would bring gain as well to the givers as to the receivers, in the liberation of the English episcopate from the particular mould into which its own past history has compressed it".⁶ The sentiments are admirably expressed and the aim is undoubtedly laudable, but is there a reasonable prospect of its achievement? Is the Church of England ready to submit episcopacy as it has received it through the centuries to

¹ *Intercommunion*: edited by Donald Baillie and John Marsh (S.C.M. Press, 1952). Paper by Professor Hodgson on *Anglicanism and Intercommunion*, p. 257.

² Prestige, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

³ Archbishop Bramhall, *Works* (L.A.C.T.), Vol. III, p. 518.

⁴ *Vide Free Church Objections to Episcopacy*: E. A. Payne in *Theology*, Vol. LIV, No. 372, June, 1951, esp. pp. 212-217.

⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 10.

such a rigorous scrutiny that it can with honesty, in proposing their acceptance of episcopacy, assure the Free Churches that it is not seeking to impose upon them its accidental defects? Is the Church of England willing and able to identify these accidental defects and so to distinguish the thing itself from its trappings as to commend it persuasively to the Free Churches?

Fourthly, it is of the greatest importance that episcopacy should not be isolated from other elements in the "general pattern of the ministration of God's grace".¹ Because episcopacy or the lack of it is the most obvious difference between the Church of England and the Free Churches, it tends to become the principal item on the agenda for discussion. Thus unwittingly the impression is given on the one side that episcopacy is the necessary condition of salvation and on the other side the impression is taken that an ecclesiastical ordinance is being substituted for the gospel of free grace. Lack of mutual understanding on this point makes impossible any advance towards greater unity. Episcopacy is only to be understood in the proper context of the whole pattern of corporate Christian life, wherein the church itself, scriptures, creeds, sacraments and ministry constitute the essential elements. "Episcopacy is not to be valued properly in isolation like a fetish dropped from heaven."² Anglicans have a particular responsibility to see that their concern for episcopacy as an essential element in this pattern should never be given expression in such a way as to suggest that they do look upon it as "a fetish dropped from heaven". These four issues are plainly involved in any sympathetic consideration of the Archbishop's proposal for closer relationships between separated Christians in England and indicate the direction which further thought and discussion ought to take.

A DOER OF THE WORD

THE name of John Stansfeld would not readily come to mind, even amongst many of those who reckon themselves well informed persons, as the name of one who exercised a creative influence in the history both of church and state during the half century which preceded the outbreak of war in 1939. Though by upbringing and predilection he was a convinced evangelical of the old school, Stansfeld was never a partisan, nor did he take an active share in the many ecclesiastical controversies of the time. Few church histories which deal with this period in England contain any mention of his name;³ he was a man too much occupied in obscure places to care anything about a reputation. Yet the story of his life⁴ confirms the justice of the remark passed by William Temple in his Beckley Social Service Lecture delivered in 1943. "Stansfeld was one of the greatest men and truest Christians whom I have ever known"⁵ and exhibits the chief lineaments of that greatness.

¹ *ibid.*, p. 9.

² *ibid.*, p. 9.

³ There is no mention of him in either of the two volumes *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century* by Roger Lloyd.

⁴ *The Doctor: The Story of John Stansfeld of Oxford and Bermondsey*, by Barclay Baron (Edward Arnold, 1952 pp. 228, 16/-).

⁵ quoted in Baron, p. 154.

For over thirty years he earned his living in the Customs and Excise branch of the Civil Service and was not ordained until well advanced in middle life. His ecclesiastical career was never distinguished in the sense that he was called to occupy any influential post. He was vicar successively of a drab parish in Bermondsey, a small slum parish in Oxford and a country parish in Oxfordshire, where he died still in harness in his eighty-sixth year. For two years, when over seventy, he served as a missionary in East Africa. This bare record of his career cannot of itself disclose the secret of his greatness. He was a man utterly dedicated to his Master and one who, by reason of that dedication, filled his life with an astonishing range of activities. As a civil servant he made use of his spare time to take a degree at Oxford, and subsequently in London to graduate in medicine. For more than ten years, as the first warden of the Oxford and Bermondsey Mission, he combined a medical and evangelistic mission in Bermondsey, described by Charles Booth in 1899 as "the greatest area of unbroken poverty in England", with his daily work as a civil servant. After marriage and ordination the pattern of his life remained the same—self-forgetful service, unceasing work, simplicity and directness of speech and action. His life in Bermondsey, to which he drew so many of the best young men Oxford had to offer before 1914, was by its cheerful acceptance of hardness an example of the only way in which people in degraded conditions could be lifted up. "Come and live the crucified life with me in Bermondsey"¹ was the invitation by which he sought to attract others to share with him in those conditions. It was a vivid parable of the scriptural truth, "we are members one of another", able to touch the imagination of sophisticated Oxford undergraduates.² "You simply can't walk the streets of Bermondsey with him and not know that Jesus is divine," was the eloquent comment of one freshman who first came to Bermondsey as a militant Unitarian.³ Stansfeld gave a telling example of the creative use of spare time and of the necessary unity of word and deed. The book can be regarded as an unusual but singularly important piece of devotional reading. It will serve to confirm faith by its moving record of what the grace of God can accomplish for the redemption of the whole man, even in the worst conditions, through one humble but dedicated spirit, and to stab awake the conscience to a more costly offering of time and talent in the service of God and man.

POSSESSING OUR POSSESSIONS

IT was in earlier generations a particular glory of Anglican divinity that its professors showed themselves well acquainted with a considerable range of patristic writings. Anglican apologists like Jewel were in the habit of deploring new fangled notions⁴ which they observed to be as common amongst Romanists as amongst Puritans.

¹ *ibid.*, p. 29.

² e.g. William Temple, Clifford Woodward, Alec Paterson and Donald Hankey.

³ *ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴ "It must be confessed that against the religion of God no heavier charge can be adduced than that of novelty." *An Apology for the Church of England*, by J. Jewel (ed. S. Isaacson, London, 1825), p. 142.

For themselves they believed that a grave respect for the history, tradition and theology of the early centuries was the surest way of determining the meaning of scripture, whose pre-eminence they delighted to proclaim. George Herbert in the early seventeenth century remarked of the country parson that while "the chief and top of his knowledge consists in the book of books, the storehouse and magazine of life and comfort, the holy scriptures . . . he hath read the fathers also and the schoolmen and the later writers, or a good proportion of all, out of all which he hath compiled a book and body of divinity which is the storehouse of his sermons and which he preacheth all his life".¹ Such an acquaintance with patristic writings gave a certain coherence to Anglican divinity in its formative period and provided a framework of reference which made both intelligible and fruitful the theological discussions of a controversial age. With the passage of time there came into existence a body of Anglican divinity, marked by a distinctive manner of approach to the central mysteries of the faith and a theological method, which proved a singularly apt instrument for the interpretation of the catholic faith in a changing intellectual climate.

It is a great misfortune that the modern ordinand is not nourished by the writings of Hooker as were so many generations of his predecessors, nor does he manifest a consciousness of standing in a great theological tradition in which truth was sought without the sacrifice of intellectual liberty or integrity. Hooker will not resolve all the theological perplexities of the modern era, but he can still be of great assistance in resisting the advance of that uncatholic temper which Bishop Burnet named as "the swallowing down whole systems by the lump, which has helped to possess people's minds too early with prejudices and to shut them up in too implicit a following of others".² It is both inevitable and right that there should be different and sometimes conflicting theological traditions within the Church of England, but all too frequently these traditions have declined into illiberal, partisan presentations of the catholic faith. A knowledge as well of some of the principal contributions to Christian thinking in the early centuries as of some of the more distinguished exponents of the Christian faith as received in the Church of England before the beginning of this century, could do more than anything else to restrain partisanship and to promote a genuine catholicity.

The modern reader who is ill-versed in the classical tongues in which so large a proportion of important Christian writings have been composed, cannot any longer complain of the lack of adequate opportunities to possess himself of the great heritage of the past. Under Roman Catholic auspices an important series of translations from the fathers, *Ancient Christian Writers*, began publication in America last year. This year the S.C.M. Press in England and the Westminster Press in America are offering to the reading public the firstfruits of an important Anglo-American enterprise. The general editors, Professor

¹ *A Priest to the Temple or The Country Parson*, by G. Herbert (ed. H. C. Beeching, London, 1898), pp. 9, 13.

² *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care*, by G. Burnet (ed. T. Dale, London, 1840), p. 113.

John Baillie of Edinburgh, Henry P. Van Dusen, President of Union Theological Seminary, New York, and John T. McNeill, professor of Church History at Union, define their objective in these words : " The Christian Church possesses in its literature an abundant and incomparable treasure. But it is an inheritance that must be reclaimed by each generation. *The Library of Christian Classics* is designed to present in the English language, and in twenty-six volumes of convenient size, a selection of the most indispensable Christian treatises written prior to the end of the sixteenth century ".¹ The limitation of the library to the end of the sixteenth century may perhaps be justified on the grounds that great Christian books written after that date are more easily accessible to the English reader. It would be a pity if the impression were given that there has been no great Christian writing since 1600.

Eight of the promised volumes in *The Library* will be devoted to a selection of patristic writings and six will contain selections from the great mass of material which survives from Latin Christendom of the medieval period. The remaining twelve volumes in the series are to make available writings of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Melanthon, Bucer, Bullinger, and several other writers representative of the spiritual and anabaptist streams of thought, as well as some of the English reformers. This emphasis on reformation treatises may be allowed if it is recalled that these writings are not easily accessible to most English churchmen. The names of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli are bandied about in contemporary discussions, but neither those who profess an almost uncritical adulation of these reformers for their work and influence, nor those who freely condemn their errors, commonly show much accurate knowledge of their teaching. The four volumes allotted each to Luther and Calvin should begin to remove this reproach. One of the first two volumes to be published is devoted to *Zwingli and Bullinger* and a particular welcome must be given to it, both for the texts which are thus made available to the English reader and for the skilful work of the editor, Dr. G. W. Bromiley, in his introductions and annotations. The name of Zwingli has the unenviable reputation of being used in current debate as a kind of theological swear word. Apart from some sixteenth century translations, Zwingli's works have not hitherto been accessible in English. It is now possible for a much wider circle of theological readers, in obedience to a reformation principle, to test the validity of Zwingli's opinions in the light of the teaching of scripture. This *Library* is an essay in theological publishing which deserves the support of all considering students of Christian literature and which should do much to promote that catholic temper in theological discussion which can only come from a wide knowledge of all the principal Christian traditions.

¹ From the General Editors' Preface, p. 9 of Vol. XXIV of *The Library of Christian Classics : Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G. W. Bromiley (S.C.M. Press, 1953, pp. 364, 30/-).