

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

The Spiritual Problems of the Great War.

II. THE CROSS AMONG THE RUINS.*

FROM the earliest days of the campaign in Belgium and Northern France we have been accustomed to stories, and photographs, of figures of our Lord upon the Cross, spared as by a miracle and left standing when all around them was in ruins. Any one who, during the first winter, spent any time in visiting as a chaplain in military hospitals will remember how often men of their own accord described such scenes and let one see the impression left by them. How general that impression is I had opportunity to notice when, in a lecture to a large audience of soldiers at one of the base camps in France last spring, I referred incidentally to the subject. At once from all over the hut went up the quick comment, "Yes, sir, we've seen that!" Months afterwards, while discussing in a mixed company some seemingly well-founded stories of the supernatural in connexion with the war, I turned to a young officer who was present—one who had lost a limb and been at death's door—and asked had he himself met anything of the sort. He was an Oxford undergraduate, though I had never met him as such, an "intellectual," and, I believe, in former days inclined to scepticism. "No," he said, "I have not—except of course the crucifixes which one continually sees still standing among the ruins." Even since the above words were written, a letter has reached me from a village in France which is thus described in passing: "It is rather a 'has-been'; a week or two ago the Hun put 200 8-inch shells into it, and now there is very little standing but the large crucifix in the churchyard, which as usual remains significantly unharmed."

Now it is easy to ridicule any emphasis on what may, of course, be only a very remarkable series of accidents. There is no proving such a matter either way, in the scientific sense of proof; though it is equally fair to remark that only an age which had lost all sense of the close relation between spirit and matter, and had even acquired a bias against the doctrine of Providence, could delight to insist

¹ A chapter from a forthcoming book, "The Valley of Decision: a Plea for Wholeness in Thought and Life," printed here by kind permission of the publishers, Messrs. Longmans, Green & Co.. It is the first chapter of Part III of the book, entitled "Via Crucis Via Pacis."

upon this fact. For myself, I wish to lay no stress on the phenomenon itself: the significant thing, for our present purpose, is the deep and general impression which that phenomenon has made on the soldiers. Of that there can be no two opinions. And, for any who believe in a purpose in things, and who know how, in their own lives, seemingly trivial causes have led to the most clearly providential results, it will follow naturally that this too has its purpose. If, in its crude condition, the impression is largely superstitious, it is for those who see more clearly to educate it into religion, by showing what it means. To many, surely, even of those who could never have expressed it, the scene did convey the three thoughts which men ever facing death most need, and which therefore the love of God would be most likely to set them thinking: first, the universal activity of God's Providence—of the care which, according to our Lord, surrounds the odd sparrow falling to the ground; secondly, the share of God in the worst sufferings of man; thirdly, the joint triumph of God and man over death itself.

But behind these more obvious messages to the men in the field, such scenes have, I venture to think, a wider and perhaps sterner message for our whole generation. In a sense they are symbolic of the world to-day as it lies beneath the gaze of God. Our material civilization, in which we trusted, is a mass of hollow ruins around us. It is not necessary that shot and shell should have passed our way. In England as much as in the actual battle areas there has been, for eyes that can see, a process of wrecking. English homes may be wrecked very thoroughly by shells that burst in Belgium or France; and life may become on a sudden a very hollow thing without any loss or disturbance of its outward trappings. We are all, surely, aware—in so far as we lay claim to any humanity—that the old life is, for all of us, wrecked for ever; that neither circumstances nor self-respect will let us return to it; and that whatever house of life we are to inhabit afterwards must be built up afresh and on other lines. But what lines? And with what encouragement for the task? On a surface view, the whole world-order stands convicted of treachery: is it worth while, with such a volcano for foundation, to try to build again at all? Why not rather yield to the feeling we most of us know so well—that, for the survivors of this ill-starred generation, the rest of life will be but a fag-end, and the merest shanty will serve to house it?

If indeed the Cross were lying shattered with all the rest, we might well sink back on an unhappy passivism. But, on any honest reading of the facts, the Cross is not down; it stands erect among the ruins, all the more conspicuous for the void around it. Before, the world's surface might have been compared to the well-known view of New York from the harbour; the old Trinity Church looking like a mere dog-kennel among the soaring sky-scrapers hemming it in. If a well-directed bombardment demolished the sky-scrapers and left the Church, its spire would once more become the landmark it was meant to be. It is just such a bombardment which has shattered twentieth-century materialism, in all its forms; in the midst of the desolation, the Cross of Christ stands out, still erect and once more conspicuous. In that lies hope, and warning, and encouragement, for those who must rebuild their lives. The shell-scarred but unconquered crucifixes of Flanders have a message for the survivors, as well as for "those that are appointed to die."

In a word, they sum up in a symbol the only safe philosophy of life, and provide the needed "working hypothesis" for a new adventure. In the familiar words of Browning—

"The acknowledgment of God in Christ,
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it,
And hath so far advanced thee to be wise."

It is a hypothesis which, when fairly tried, has abundantly justified its adoption in the past; it has been vindicated from every point of view in the present; and one fails to see on what other it is either worth while to start rebuilding or possible to overcome the difficulties of the task.

That "the Way of Peace" should be a spiritual way is only natural. For one thing, the only guarantee of peace between nations lies in spiritual community between them. Where material possessions are in question there must always be competition, and there will therefore be friction, until it is recognized that these are but the meanest class of goods: that the higher goods of life are far above the partitions of nationality; that the wealth or poverty of one nation in these things means the wealth or poverty of all; and that to share one's own stock is the best way to enlarge it. "The most

binding of international links are not connected with State action at all. This lies at the heart of our criticism of the modern German theory and tyranny of the State, that the greatest and deepest things which bind mankind together, and create what we call 'humanity,' are independent of State control, and would grow even without State support. Religion, science, sympathy, these are the strongest bonds."¹

So even the German philosopher Eucken² claims that the State is inadequate to fulfil the spiritual ideals of mankind, for it "can only consider and maintain the common level of spiritual life, not its wider and more spontaneous experiences." What, then, is adequate to fulfil the ideals of mankind, including the ideal, never more ardently desired than now, of peace in universal brotherhood? Not "religion, science, sympathy," as commonly understood. The wars of religion are a byword and "the common level of spiritual life" has proved but too compatible with war; the savants of the belligerent countries have vied with the mob in denouncing one another's cause; and the vague "sympathies" produced by travel, common interests, literary friendships, and the like, soon shrivelled in the conflagration. We must go deeper, and we can go deeper, but only at the cost of complete readjustment of life.

The Cross is the clue. It stands, as we have seen, for the denial of all material values—even of the value of "self" as embodied in flesh and blood, the symbol and vehicle of separate identity—except in relation to spiritual ends; and it recognizes no valid end except that the will of God should be done.

"Life's but a means unto an end; that end
Beginning, mean, and end to all things—God."

This does not abolish the need for and value of material possessions, which are the source of friction; but it puts them in an entirely different light. They are valuable only in so far as they serve a spiritual end. But spiritual ends can never conflict, in so far as they *are* spiritual. My spiritual ends (whether I am an individual or a nation) have no independent existence as "mine": in fact I only attain them in so far as God is attaining His ends at the same time. "Whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God": only so shall we do it to our own real

¹ Marvin, "Leadership of the World" (Oxford Pamphlets), pp. 23-4.

² Quoted in "Reflections of a Non-combatant," M. D. Petre, p. 106.

advantage, and then it will be equally to the advantage of our neighbour. The glory of God is bound up with the good of *all* mankind; and I (the man or the nation) can only be gaining and growing in proportion as all around me share my gains and grow with my growth. "We are all members one of another," and the only true growth is to "grow up into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ." Therefore, when the situation is worked out, my material possessions, including myself and all my powers, are simply so much endowment for the benefit of the world at large through me. I (again the man or the nation) have the responsibility of deciding, in consultation with the Giver, how they may most fully serve this purpose. In that decision I shall inevitably be haunted by the selfward bias, which is the penalty of fallen individuality, the false sense of being an isolated unit, an end in myself, the centre of my own universe. And therefore the first thing needful is the correction of this bias by the obliteration of self, and the substitution of another centre for it in my universe.

For that God has provided in the Cross of Christ. It is only in so far as the spirit of the Cross, so conceived, becomes the pervading spirit of human society that there will be any guarantee of "Peace upon earth": for only then will men view themselves and their possessions—the sources of strife—in their true perspective, and put them to their intended use. And only then will humanity really find itself, through the individual and the nation alike fitting into their places in the Family of God, the Body of Christ.

In Christ, St. Paul tells us, there is "neither Jew nor Greek, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, bond, nor free, but Christ is all things, and in all." In other words, the suppression of self and substitution for it of Christ as the Source and Guide of personal action, which is the distinctive act and habit of the Christian, has as its logical result "the parliament of man, the federation of the world." The way even to political peace must be the way of spiritual brotherhood, through the submission of each separate individuality—personal or national—to the Spirit of God, which is the Spirit of the Cross. It is in spiritual measures and spiritual men that our hope for peace between nations must lie, because only such have hold of the principle of self-suppression as the key to life.

The reassuring thing which the war has revealed to us is the fact symbolized by "the Cross among the ruins"—the fact the

human nature still recognizes, responds to, and rejoices in this principle. The passion for self-sacrifice, revealing itself often in the least likely places, and transfiguring the commonest natures with its light, is surely evidence of this. The recognition of the principle is, of course, not always conscious nor explicit. But sometimes it is. "I never enjoyed myself so much," wrote a young officer to his former headmaster the day before he was killed. "You will know what I mean. I never knew before what it was *to be taken so completely out of myself.*" It is this experience—the experience of very many in this war—which we need to make conscious and permanent in those who have it, and to extend to those who have it not. If we can do so, the future is saved, and all the great sacrifice will be justified. And, because this self-suppression is not, after all, an end in itself, but only the condition of the incoming of a new Personality—the Spirit of Jesus Christ Himself—the rebuilding of the ruins may be better and more speedily achieved than we dare to imagine. For God will be the Master-builder.

The difficulties of course are obvious : considered in the abstract and in cold blood, religious revival on a national scale seems one of the last things we should dare to hope for. And yet there are encouraging conditions too.

In the first place, history has again proved the transitoriness of force and the rapid conquering-power of ideas. M. Deschanel, President of the French Chamber, recounted lately in a speech a remark of Napoleon I towards the close of his reign : "Do you know what I most admire in the world ? It is the powerlessness of material force. Sooner or later, the sword is conquered by the idea." And "the idea" in the present case is no abstract one : it is one which we have seen to be embodied in human nature, and which has the Spirit of God behind it.

In the second place, there is a vast though vague discontent with the principles which the war has exposed and condemned, and a sense that it is time for a change. It is true that among our own people this discontent is slow to reveal itself in practical forms : so many are still too much absorbed in the commercial side of the war to give real thought to its spiritual aspects. But in France it is otherwise ; and in England the change is coming gradually. "The French people," said a leading article in *The Times* on August 7, 1915, "see that the kind of life we lived before August 1914, is

gone beyond recall. They realize that we have reached a turning-point, not only in the history of the world, but in the internal history of all the combatants; and the perception of this truth has made it easier for them to accept the changes that have already come." The experimenting with possible alternatives to the law of Christ had been done by the world at large already, in the fifty years preceding the war: and the results had already proved disheartening. "The present age," wrote an observer of that period, "is moved with thoughts beyond the reach of its powers. . . . There is hardly any limit to its despair or hope. It has a far larger faith in the destiny of man . . . and yet it is *sure* of hardly anything, except that the ancient rules of human life are false." ¹ Even on that last point it had latterly begun to feel doubts, and a shy desire to reappropriate Christianity by some other name. "He hung upon the fringe of that very modern, new-fashioned, almost freakish army that worships old, old ideals, yet insists upon new-fangled names for them. Christ, doubtless, was his model, but it must be a Christ properly and freshly labelled; his Christianity must somewhere include the prefix 'neo,' and the word 'scientific' must also be dragged in if possible." So writes Mr. Algernon Blackwood of a character in his "Prisoner in Fairyland," a few years back; and, of another character in the same story, we are told that he "abandons his schemes of 'Organized Public Philanthropy' for the harder, more important, more Christ-like duty to his neighbour. But he calls it 'collecting starlight,' and explains it in terms which Professor Bergson would recognize." Now that the war has at once smashed up unrealities and given the world a good excuse for a new start, we may surely expect from such people—and they are many—a more open following of Christ, if but a lead can be wisely given.

Thirdly, the necessary recklessness for giving such a lead, or following it openly when given, has been instilled into very many by what they have lost and suffered in the war. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"; and "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." The people who have suffered fully and suffered well are the hope of the future: for they have been driven to the needed otherworldliness, and have shed the usual temptations to conceal the fact. Their belief in the transiency of the material order and the higher reality of the spiritual is not

¹ Sir Henry Jones, "Browning," p. 74.

only their comfort, but it is the thing which determines their outlook. And as, bit by bit, they realize how much they are dependent upon it, they will begin to work and to fight for the gospel which warrants their faith. "Give me a dozen really detached men," said Philip Neri, a Roman Catholic saint, "and I will convert the world." Such detachment a great many are being forced to acquire: it only needs to be consecrated.

And, finally, there is surely a general feeling that the head has failed us as a guide in life, and now should be the turn of the heart: which opens the door to the Religion of Love. Our modern economic structure, which has gone to pieces, is based on the political economy of John Stuart Mill; and in his system, as some one has put it, there is no love. The strongest force in human nature, constructive or destructive according as it is handled, is ignored in a system which, to the mind of its own age, was going to provide society with a stable groundwork because it was so scientific. Since then we have learned, and the war has been teaching us yet further, that a little sympathy is worth a great deal of science. "The remedy for all the sufferings of the modern brain is enlargement of heart."¹ And that remedy is what religion exists to apply, especially the Religion of the Cross.

There is, then, in many ways, an opening for a forward movement in religion; it existed already before the war, and has been emphasized by it. But the cause of religion never advances by itself, nor even by the unaided act of God. There can only be divine progress where there is human faith; and the only kind of faith which casts out devils, removes mountains, and turns the world upside down—the things which must be done if there is to be progress to-day—is the faith which is indistinguishable from sacrifice, because its object is the Symbol of sacrifice, the Cross of Christ. The way of the Cross is our one remaining way to peace.

E. A. BURROUGHS.

¹ Guyau, "L'Irréligion de l'Avenir," p. 410: quoted by Sabatier.

