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A Question of Aesthetics.

TO the foolish among us the War has come as a wonderful endorsement of all their ancient prejudices, and its grim incidents have simply provided confirmation of all they feared would happen were their dogmas disregarded; to the wise it has come as a challenge to examine themselves, to set their house in order, to ask what it was in them that made it easier for the nations to lapse into this tragical confusion. Not that we can guarantee the future against such another tragedy by any wisdom of ours—but the Church at least would be unworthy of herself if in some measure she did not seek to find why her influence failed to keep men in a better mind. This self-examination has resulted in a host of earnest and important books, of which one, that summons us to the rediscovery, the serious study of the philosophy of the Spirit, should command the careful consideration of all Christians. The author, Mr. Clutton Brock, asserts that Goodness, Truth and Beauty possess an absolute value as pure activities of the Spirit. In this he really utters nothing new, but the way in which he presents and develops his theme is fresh and challenging. The challenge is sounded to all Christians. Evangelical Churchmen will be tempted to reply that they have ever stood for goodness and truth (though there is room for much penitence and amendment among us in respect of these qualities), but will they be inclined even to listen to any plea urged on behalf of beauty, much less claim to have emphasized it duly hitherto? That serious thinkers are giving considerable place to æsthetics in their philosophy of life is clear enough from such a book as Mr. Balfour's *Theism and Humanism.* The question in this article is addressed solely to a section of Churchmen; and it is to ask Evangelicals whether they, as such, have any interest in Beauty as an activity of the Spirit,—whether they give any place in their philosophy to æsthetics?

This question asked at such a time may seem inopportune and even impertinent. The very horror of our present situation, however, sets men searching for the Beautiful as a relief from the grim ugliness of war; and further, though Kultur may be disgraced, it is by no means true that Culture is, and if Evangelical principles are, as all good Evangelicals must think, the most direct approach to

the heart of true religion and therefore the surest foundations of true religion in the nation, then disregard of the Beautiful must involve the alienation of a vast number of the rising generation. I say "disregard" deliberately. There may be acceptance or there may be renunciation of the Beautiful; neither of these, as I shall hope to show, need prove fatal—but disregard must prove so, for the Beautiful has too wide and too sublime an appeal, to be set on one side as a thing quite indifferent. Our question, therefore, becomes this. Are Evangelical principles compatible with Culture? Can an Evangelical take an interest in Beauty or not?

But first, what are Evangelical principles? It has been urged with justice that the words "experimental religion" sum up Evangelical principles. These words mean a real, vital, personal experience of the need of spiritual regeneration, nay more, of the fact of regeneration in Christ, and with that of immediate access to God, direct communion with the divine. This end, of course, is not exclusively confined to Evangelicals (thank God), nor should we think of Evangelicalism as claiming some monopoly in admitting to the Kingdom of God, but Evangelicalism does assert that inasmuch as the end is personal enjoyment of the Presence of God, so too the means thereto are personal and immediate, and all its principal tenets assert that immediacy—such as justification by faith, the doctrine of "assurance," the emphasis on the heavenly Session of Our Lord, and the insistence upon sacramental Communion rather than the sacrificial propitiation of the Mass. Thus conversion finds a great place in Evangelical preaching; witness is emphasized, and missionary enterprise rather than elaborate services or costly churches remains the chief monument of the Evangelical school of thought.

But how does this work out? Not long ago an Evangelical clergyman urged his hearers to have "no interests but the interests of the Lord Jesus." Who would not endorse this? But it is important to know what the preacher meant. Did he counsel a conscious jettisoning of all interests, innocent and even healthy in themselves but not specifically religious? When Frances Ridley Havergal says,—

> "Take my voice and let me sing
> Only always for my King,"

one cannot evade the suspicion that she meant "let me sing nothing

but 'the songs of Zion.'" It is not a long step from this to the position that consecration is mutilation.

Now that position has a quite respectable history. When Plotinus discourses on the beautiful, in spite of his constant use of the physically beautiful in illustration, the conclusion at which he arrives is practically withdrawal from all interest in the physically beautiful to concentrate the attention of the inward eye upon the ideal, the mystical Beauty.

The same renunciation of outward Beauty marked the purest periods of the monastic system, and is clear in the influence of the early Friars and of Savonarola. It has more sacred and august example in the history of Bezaleel, whose craftsmanship in the fabric of the Tabernacle was subjected to the strictest of restraints. There is no doubt that a good and strong case could be made out for an attitude of entire renunciation of the Beautiful as expressed in Art. Such renunciation has its own power of attraction. It is a summons to sacrifice, and calls for the heroism that gladly abandons all in the service of the Faith.

But it cannot be said that Evangelicalism makes this decisive renunciation. The mere fact that grudging improvements in the outward array of our services have been admitted shows that there is no clearly defined principle of renunciation of the æsthetic appeal. Nor have Evangelicals taken a firm stand against the spread of artistic influences in domestic life. Not even Quakerism has been able to maintain its pristine austerity in matter of dress and manner of life. Evangelicalism both within the Church and outside of it has been more remarkable for timidity than uncompromising boldness, and it is this timidity which is so dangerous. In the field of scholarship it has hindered the progress of the party disastrously. The aspiring student, with a few happy exceptions, finds himself hemmed in by this feeling of timidity and tends in consequence to break away from an environment so little interested in study. The tradition is very old. Henry Venn thus once discouraged a young friend who urged the necessity of studying the Scriptures in the original tongues. Having enunciated the principle that all things necessary to be known are the same in every version as in the original, he goes on: "If so, then whatever is not to be known but by scholars and masters in the Hebrew tongue, cannot with truth be ranked higher than among matters of curiosity and amusement

which may employ idle men of a critical taste, as the whole system of plants employed the attention of Solomon. Yet he who possessed the largest intellect ever given to man had probably never been such a reproach to the Israel of God, had he spent more of his precious time upon the 'manifest necessaries' and less in making the wonderful discoveries he did in the creation of God" (*Life and Letters of H. Venn*, 1853, p. 536). Comment is hardly needed upon the strange mixture in this passage of a noble resolution to "redeem the time" and an amazing confession of thought that can ascribe the great king's moral downfall to his applying his attention to making wonderful discoveries in the creation of God!

Even stronger language comes from John Newton in respect of Art. Writing to a parishioner on a visit to Rome in a letter which, according to his biographer, displays "his address in attempting to break the enchantments with which men of taste are surrounded, when standing in the centre of the fine arts," he says: "Thus vanity and mischief are the chief rulers of unsanctified genius; the artists spin webs, and the philosophers by their learned speculations hatch cockatrices, to poison themselves and their fellow-creatures: few of either sort have one serious thought of that awful eternity, upon the brink of which they stand for a while, and into the depth of which they successively fall" (*Memoir*, Ed. 1835, p. 61).

Such language, one may say, proclaims its date. Time perhaps has worn off some of the angularity displayed in such an attitude as this. But might not still the philosopher wonder if he could be at home among the Evangelicals, or the artist think that he must drop from his nerveless fingers the unhallowed brush in such company? Dare we—not to say, can we afford to—bid such men be gone to circles in the Christian community where philosophy and art shall be welcome? If so, we must face the fact that as education spreads, and the love of the beautiful is more widely cultivated, the hold of Evangelicalism will tend more and more to be relaxed. It would seem that here is a choice that must be faced. It is timely to face it now, for the present time offers no little opportunity. The taste for the florid or the bizarre seems to be giving place to taste for the simple and the austere. Beauty is sought rather than ornament, and quality is being appreciated rather than the merely superficial or the vapidly pretty. In a

word, restrained self-expression is coming into its own, and this surely marches with the Evangelical tradition of personal religion and self-control. Hitherto, in order to keep abreast of the times, we have rather encouraged than discouraged the cult of the ecclesiastical furnisher, the provider of the fashionable thing in Church decoration; again, partly in our endeavour to reach the popular mind, we have lagged behind in the matter of quality in Church music; or preoccupation with missionary endeavour or evangelistic effort has made us blind to the value of the nobler enjoyments that can occupy the mind and lift men above the craving for unsatisfying pleasures. Yet it is just in the quieter pursuits of the life of the spirit that one of the ways for the restoration of home and family religion lies open; it is precisely in noble simplicity and reticent beauty that Evangelicalism might express itself. To achieve such self-expression will cost money and thought. It will require self-discipline and some education; but I venture to submit that the results would repay the effort.

Yet when all is said on behalf of beauty, it must remain true that no beauty suffices for the worship of the Most High unless it be the beauty of holiness. Far be it from me to suggest anything approaching to a diminution of zeal or a neglect of holiness. In one sense Keswick and the C.M.S. are nobler monuments than any lovely edifice or splendid service. It is abundantly clear that an atmosphere of prayer and a sense of spiritual reality makes a Church attractive and a service helpful more truly than any wealth of ornament or efficiency of music. But there need be no divorce. Beauty mates with holiness, and the eye is an avenue to the heart. A recent correspondence in *The Times* has been discussing the relation of Puritanism to Music. As the Bishop of Durham points out, there is abundant evidence of the cultivation of music and literary art among the Puritans. The indifference or the timidity appear to be of later date than the palmary days of Puritanism, and are perhaps a belated survival of monastic asceticism. What is required of us is surely to assimilate the strength of Puritanism while learning to avoid its weaknesses, to appreciate its self-restraint while refusing its narrow prejudices. If we will do that it will be possible for us, while steadily keeping in view the high end to which we travel and would lead men, to make the road thereto a way of beauty as well as holiness.

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