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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.

THEOLOGICAL TWO-WAY TRAFFIC

THE insularity of British theology has been frequently remarked and it is certainly true that most of the leading English-speaking theologians of the last hundred years have refused to be stampeded by the latest extravagance of the schools and continued to manifest those qualities of caution and sober judgment which not infrequently excite derision in scholars of other national traditions. But this insularity, if it be a fact, is not due to lack of acquaintance with the theological work of the continent. The majority of British scholars take considerable pains to study the work of French, German, and even Scandinavian writers and many of them have at some time spent periods abroad in study at one or more continental universities. The influence of Rudolf Otto on C. H. Dodd has been considerable, while the names of Barth and Brunner have become household words in theological circles in this country. The perusal of Cullman's *Christ and Time*, an important and significant contribution to contemporary discussions on primitive Christianity, reveals the lack of any reference to English writing on this theme and a preoccupation with the views of Werner, Barth and Bultmann. No English-speaking theologian has his name recorded in the index of authors, yet the subject which Cullman is seeking to investigate, namely the distinctive content of primitive Christianity, has received notable treatment in this country, particularly at the hands of C. H. Dodd.¹

This curious ignorance of English writing on the part of so distinguished and well informed a teacher as the Strasbourg professor would suggest that there is often on the part of theologians as great a want of mutual knowledge and understanding as there is amongst the rank and file of church members from different national traditions. If the ecumenical movement is to perform the indispensable service of making possible a genuine universe of discourse between Christians of all traditions, then there must be wider knowledge of the diverse ways in which scholars are formulating and expounding the theological problems of the day. In particular French and German scholars could not only assist their own proper work by a more thorough study of the Anglo-Saxon theological tradition, but also further that mutual sharing in each other's church life, which can be the most fruitful result of ecumenical work.

¹ Vide, *The Parables of the Kingdom, The Apostolic Preaching and its Development, and History and the Gospel.*

RETURN FROM UTOPIA

WHEN a politician who has been a Cabinet Minister and who has had ample opportunities for observing and reflecting upon the contemporary scene, concludes an essay on the significance of what is happening to us with the words, "Lucifer is the Prince of Darkness and he is massing all the reserves of night to overwhelm us. I think that we shall not withstand him unless we seek again the grace of God", it is time to listen carefully to his message. Mr. Richard Law, who bears an honoured name in English politics, has set himself to examine the sickness of modern society and to suggest the treatment which is needed.¹ He believes that "regarded from the point of view of morality Utopia is the worst of political organisations". He exposes the confusions which all too often becloud honest judgment in a mass of verbiage, and the dangers which confront society when the whole activity of the community is controlled and directed in detail by the state.

The book poses three questions, which Christians concern with society must face and strive to answer, lest Christians in zeal for participation in affairs should betray their calling in the present age and allow their energies to be exploited for ends which are really destructive of Christian values. In the first place, Utopia as the symbol of an ideal society, capable of realisation in time, by the labours and sacrifices of the generations, is a will-o'-the-wisp which can only lead men astray. It ignores the persistence of folly, error and wrong doing and allows those who pursue it to act as if they were the guardians and servants of an immutable sacrosanct revelation. The extraordinary sensitiveness to criticism manifested by the holders of high office, and the bland assumption that critics are mere reactionaries, culpably blind to the righteousness of their rulers and determined to restore injustice at the earliest opportunity, are ominous signs of a conviction of moral superiority and social infallibility which is associated with the political religion of the Kremlin. There is no tyranny like the tyranny which the idealist in power is prepared to exercise in the pursuit of his vision, and a democratic tyranny would be as horrible to contemplate or to endure as the tyrannies of Berlin or Moscow. Social ideals, if they are not to be the curse of politics or to promote the tyranny of the majority, must be divested of any infallible authority.

Secondly, it is the nature and destiny of man which is really at stake in the political conflicts of our time and there can be no easy division of political parties into good and bad, progressive and reactionary. All are infected by the corruption of false objectives and utopian ideals. The dignity of man is being diminished and his personality devalued until we easily assume that a society which is moved by humane considerations is a better society than one in which personal liberty is cherished as the supreme objective of political action. The goodness of human society consists not in the material benefits it makes available to its members but in the possibilities it holds out for the exercise of human virtue. "A good beef animal is one that feeds well and fattens easily. We do not call a man good because he feeds well and fattens

¹ Richard Law, *Return from Utopia* (Faber and Faber, 1950, pp. 206, 12/6).

easily ; or because he has a good coat, a smooth skin, and hard muscles rippling beneath it. Still less do we call him good because he gets a pension when he is sixty, or because his wife will have the best of medical care when she is brought to childbed. . . . All the paraphernalia of the welfare state has its rightful place and there is no need to under-estimate it. But let us not imagine that it has anything to do with the essential humanity of man ; it has to do with the farm-yard". If means are confused with ends, then the state becomes not the servant but the master of men and they its unresisting slaves.

Thirdly, experience of life and politics in the first half of the twentieth century has brought Mr. Law to the conviction that the source and continuing inspiration of social virtues " matters most profoundly ". The paradoxes of this age in which a growth of benevolence and humanitarianism has been accompanied by lawlessness and violence on a terrible scale, together with the emergence of a society less happy and stable, have driven him " most reluctantly to the conclusion that humanism has no real powers of endurance, and that good intentions which are not rooted in the idea of God and which are not supported by divine sanctions, have not the stamina to prevail for long in a world of evil ".¹ The nature of political action is bound up with an understanding of man and his destiny which in the end depends upon a theological judgment. An affirmation that God exists or a denial of His existence, is an affirmation or denial about man and his nature in society. Christian conviction has a vital part to play in enabling politicians to make their decisions from the right perspective and to allow the right motives full course. For the Christian the improvement of social conditions and the removal of poverty are of the highest importance " to the extent to which they reflect the duty which the Christian owes to his God and the concern of the Christian for his neighbour ". The book is to be commended to all considering churchmen because it presents these and other questions to the reader in a sober fashion, but leaves him in no doubt of the gravity of the issues involved.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF AN ORTHODOX BISHOP

A RECENT lecture^a by the late Archbishop Germanos on the seventeenth century Oecumenical Patriarch, Cyril Lucar, illustrates the great difficulties encountered even by so experienced and prominent a churchman in promoting reform in the Orthodox Church, through a wider knowledge of the procedures of other communions. For a century and a half before Cyril entered upon his high office the Orthodox churches, with the exception of the patriarchate of Moscow, had been living under the hard conditions of Turkish domination, and it required great prudence, skill, and acumen to defend the ecclesiastical and national life of those communities. Reform, however

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 199 ; cf. p. 195, " There is nothing to be said for Utopia ; it spells the doom of twentieth century man unless he can make good his escape from it ".

² Archbishop Germanos, *Kyrillos Loukaris, 1572-1638*. (S.P.C.K., 1951, pp. 31, 1/3).

much needed, could be represented as such a criticism of Greek Christianity as to amount to unpardonable treachery against national and Christian traditions. A reformer was bound to have a difficult path to tread. The interest displayed by western Christendom in these problems was partly religious—in a genuine concern for the survival of a vigorous Christianity in a Turkish environment—and partly the result of that ecclesiastical imperialism which was so congenial to the highest authorities in the Roman Church. The papacy was not averse to the employment of agents who would exploit the difficulties of Constantinople in an effort to reduce the Orthodox to the Roman obedience. These ecclesiastical rivalries were complicated by the political and commercial rivalries of the Western powers with their divided ecclesiastical allegiances.

The miserable story recounted in this lecture displays the unfortunate results which attend upon efforts to manipulate politics for ecclesiastical purposes. In less than a score of years, Cyril was deposed five times from the patriarchal throne and finally liquidated through the intrigues of his enemies. It was inevitable that he should seek friendship and support from the ambassadors at Constantinople who represented the non-Roman powers (England, Holland, and Sweden), in an attempt to counter the unceasing pressure of Roman Catholic powers. But in this way Cyril inevitably exposed himself to the charge of heresy, and the Dutch ambassador reported to his government that the Patriarch had become a Calvinist at heart. For a few months it seemed as though an alliance between Calvinist and Orthodox Christians had entered the realm of possibilities. But nothing came of it, and Constantinople remained in isolation from Rome, Geneva and Canterbury and deprived of that intellectual and spiritual renewal which Cyril Lucar with his knowledge of Western church life in its varied forms had been so well qualified to lead.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

IT is said that a certain Scots minister, at the conclusion of a course of sermons on 'questions people are asking', was surprised to find his beadle expressing satisfaction that the course had come to an end. When he enquired the reason for this satisfaction, he was informed that the questions he had propounded were not in fact the questions people were asking. The incident reveals a common fault in preachers, politicians, and publicists, who frequently present faulty solutions to the problems of the age because they have not asked the right questions. To discover what are the right questions is to go a long way on the road to spiritual and cultural recovery. Those who have been responsible for the activities of the Christian Frontier Council have attempted with some success from the standpoint of Christian conviction to discover what are the right questions to pose in the crisis of our time. At the close of the war, another group of people, conscious of the fact that "we cannot expect to find a valid answer (to our problem) without having first asked the right question", founded the Present Question Conference, which in 1948 was formed into a non-profit making, non-political, non-sectarian, independent association. Since

1946 an annual conference has been held at which in turn some aspect of the modern dilemma, like 'The problem of leadership in a free society' or 'What motives urge men to liberty?', has been discussed with the aid of experts and the technique of frank debate in discussion groups. It is a significant fact that the project was launched, without any funds or backing, by a group of people who were not widely known; and yet from the time of the first conference at Exeter in 1946 hundreds of people have been drawn into its work and have expressed their belief in its objects and its methods. The substance of most of the addresses delivered at the successive conferences has been printed in the journal *Question*¹ and merits the close attention of all who are concerned with the human problem in this generation.

The convictions which lie behind this important and promising development are, first, that "question and answer can only be born out of a conception of wholeness", and secondly, of the need for men to expose themselves in an attitude of give and take to the point of view of others. The disintegration of society has reached the stage at which politicians, sociologists, biologists, physicists, philosophers and divines all have what they believe is the right answer to the puzzle of our time; and yet these answers are in conflict with each other and in their separateness quite inadequate before the totality of that puzzle. Thus the method followed at the conferences has been to put "a fundamental problem in the centre, towards which, like the petals of a flower, each specialist field of human knowledge gave its contribution". This sharing of experience is a first important step towards restoring fully human relationships in place of the growing habit of approaching people only in their functional capacity. "Community," says Dr. J. H. Oldham,² "means and can only mean the continuous tension of two separate, independent points of view, each of which renounces the claim to say the last, final and decisive word". This is another way of saying that a true relationship depends upon the treatment of each individual as a human being with a unique and whole personality. Only in such a relationship does man become truly human. The development of the work of this conference demands the close attention and where possible the active participation of Christians who seek to grapple with the overwhelming problems of the fear-ridden neurotic civilization in which our lives are set.

A VICTORIAN PROPHET

FEW things have been more significant in recent years than the way in which F. D. Maurice has been engaging the attention of serious theologians. Maurice Reckitt, Miss F. Higham, Canon Vidler, H. G. Wood and finally Professor Michael Ramsey have within the last four years enriched the already considerable body of literature about Maurice with important studies of the man and his influence. The picture which emerges from these studies is one of an attractive personality, a sympathetic mind, but a teacher who baffled most of his

¹ Edited by H. Westmann, three times a year; published by Hammond, Hammond & Co., Ltd., at 7/6 annually.

² *Question*, Vol. I, No. 1, p. 19.

contemporaries by disallowing their shibboleths and refusing to permit himself to be classified in any of the ready made categories of the day. Only a tiny minority of discerning writers, amongst whom must be numbered Hort, showed themselves aware of the importance of his work at the time. Westcott was not unconscious of a certain kinship of ideas with Maurice, although the realisation led him to avoid reading his books, for, as he said, "I felt his way of thinking was so like my own that if I read Maurice I should endanger my originality".

The latest study by Professor Ramsey¹ carries the full title of *F. D. Maurice and the Conflicts of Modern Theology* and sketches the relation of Maurice to some of the chief theological tendencies of the period since the Napoleonic wars. Maurice often wrote in a style which was execrable and rendered his meaning even more difficult to grasp, nor did he conceive it to be his business to construct a tidy scheme of theological thought which should be readily comprehensible. "My business," he once remarked, "because I am a theologian and have no vocation except for theology, is not to build but to dig". It was for theology itself that he contended in all the controversies in which he became involved and not for any school or tradition of theology. As a consequence he frequently stood alone and indeed shrank with horror from the prospect of forming a band of disciples. Yet the renewed interest in his teaching which is now apparent suggests that the phrase applied by John Stuart Mill to Coleridge, that his was one of the seminal minds of the century, could with equal justice be applied to Maurice.

There are four leading issues in the modern situation on which Maurice has some important things to say which we can ill afford to neglect. First, devout churchmen and thinkers are constantly beset by the temptation to fall into the sin of irreligious solicitude for God. The middle period of Maurice's life coincided with the full development of the industrial age in this country and the threatened violence of revolutionary politics. To these tendencies, Tractarians and Evangelicals in their different ways opposed a wall of supernatural doctrine and other worldly anti-rationalism. Maurice by his concentration on the proper work of theology perceived in these events a "set of aspirations to be met by churchpeople at their own level and if not to be corrected and purged, at least to be spoken to with some apprehension of what they were at". The need for sympathetic understanding of the meaning of contemporary events and the human aspirations incoherently expressed through them is as urgent to-day as in 1851. Maurice with his emphasis on *Christus Consummator* and *Ecclesia Consummatrix* manifested an unusual capacity to meet other people on their own ground and to help them to understand the incompleteness of their own thought. Secondly, churchmen of the nineteenth century were as easily persuaded as politicians and industrialists that the social and economic life of the nation was subject to inexorable economic laws which would brook no interference. Maurice was not disposed to treat the Gospel as an easy panacea for the ills of society, but he realised the importance of uncovering the long-forgotten truths

¹ Arthur Michael Ramsey, *F. D. Maurice*. (Cambridge University Press, 1951, pp. 118, 10/6.)

about the Christian foundations of man's life in society. "Competition is put forth as the law of the universe. That is a lie. The time is come for us to declare that it is a lie." Such convictions led Maurice into considerable labour, for "the devil will not in the least mind my saying the church has a bearing upon all common life if I take no pains that my particular church should bear upon it at all". The title Christian Socialism was chosen deliberately as the only title which could define the object of a Christian concern for man in society which was not the mere echo of the sentiments of a party programme but which would "commit us at once to the conflict we must engage in sooner or later with the *unsocial Christians and the unchristian Socialists*".

The third issue which became acute during the later years of Maurice's life was the challenge offered by science to traditional theological notions and the rise of biblical criticism. Maurice had been personally acquainted with Bishop Colenso, but he could not conceal his belief that Colenso was blind to the real theological issue. Although he lacked any training in or extensive knowledge of the critical historical method, Maurice was ready to assert the rights of critical study and to deplore that "fanaticism against criticism" which had been aroused by the ecclesiastical hysteria of the times. Nevertheless he was aware that criticism might lose the key to the Bible, through its own wrong assumptions (this was the burden of his criticism of Colenso and Prince Lee, Bishop of Manchester), and pointed to the fact that the literature and religious experience of Israel could never have taken shape without such divine acts in history as formed the core of the biblical testimony to the living God. This was to anticipate the modern emphasis on revelation through events. Lastly, Maurice, coming from a Unitarian home, strove to become a full Church of England man and regarded the Prayer Book, the Creeds and the Thirty-Nine Articles as sure defences against the systems and 'isms' of the day. He would have no dealings with parties, who in their zeal for the truth they saw distorted or denied other equally important aspects of truth and so indulged a spirit of propaganda foreign to the true unity of the church. "The desire for unity and the search for unity," he wrote, "both in the nation and in the church has haunted me all my days". It is not surprising that a great Anglican teacher, lately departed from our midst, Father Kelly, should have remarked, "I learnt almost everything first from Maurice: then I learnt it over again several times". There could be no better way of beginning to fulfil in this age theological responsibility to church and nation than by sitting at the feet of this Victorian prophet.

MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

THE existence of more than twelve million wireless and television licences gives evidence of the existence of an instrument of communication with far-reaching social implications. The average listening public on a winter night is estimated to be not less than one in four of the total adult population of Great Britain. If television is developed on the same scale as radio, the effect on the social habits of coming generations will be very considerable. With these facts in

mind, the British Council of Churches, towards the end of 1948, appointed a commission "to consider from the Christian point of view the influence of broadcasting on the life of the nation". The report¹ of that commission is a document full of informed comment and valuable suggestions which is worthy to stand alongside the much more bulky report of the government Broadcasting Committee appointed in 1949.

The commissioners interpreted their task in a twofold way in accordance with the terms of reference formulated by the British Council of Churches. One section was set to investigate the responsibility and standards of the B.B.C. and to find an answer to the question whether the claim that these standards should still be Christian could be maintained. Their report begins with a recognition that the present epoch is distinguished by the lack of genuine and deeply held convictions not only religious but of any kind and considers that the B.B.C. is bound to play a decisive part in the "fundamental struggle for the recovery of genuine conviction". There appears to be undeniable evidence of an all-round decline in serious listening, and the commissioners suggest that there should be a great increase of controversial debate over the air designed "to lay bare essential issues and to eliminate secondary questions in the minds of the listeners, so that the basic conditions of an informed judgment are assured". The report proceeds to a summary of the three essential conditions which should govern the work of the B.B.C.—"a sense of purpose, freedom from external interference and freedom to take the initiative". In the light of these principles they argue strongly for the continuance of the present method of a monopoly exercised by a public corporation, as against the alternatives of "direct control by government or retreat into commercial broadcasting". Freedom to take the initiative if generally agreed would involve the B.B.C. in the exercise of a prophetic office "to some extent", in the effort to help perplexed men and women "to discern the signs of the times". The need for this Christian and cultural task is evident when the observation of the government commission is recalled²; "the Charter lists the purposes of broadcasting in order as information, education and entertainment. The vast majority of listeners put these purposes in a different order, with entertainment first". The British Council of Churches committee justly insists that the scope of religious broadcasting should be recognised as exceeding the work actually done by the Religious Broadcasting Department and "as touching all matters involved in the right ordering of society; that wherever the Christian mind has a contribution to make, that contribution should be heard".

The second part of the report examines in some detail the regular religious broadcasts and comes to the conclusion that an important and valuable piece of work is being well done. The B.B.C. provides the churches with an immense congregation (at least nine million people listen to Sunday Half-hour and over four million to the People's Service) and keeps the mass of people aware of some outline of the

¹ *Christianity and Broadcasting*. (S.C.M. Press, 1950, pp. 52, 2/6.)

² Report of the Broadcasting Committee, p. 21. (H.M.S.O., 1951, 6/6)

Christian Gospel and its significance. But this service, important though it is, has a restricted value which the commissioners describe as a "holding operation", comparable to a wall of sandbags erected against the encroaching tide of heathen ideologies. Such a wall will not last for ever, and there is a great responsibility resting upon the churches both to make better use for the religious education of their own members of the material the B.B.C. provides and to follow up the work done amongst the "fringe" by radio. One suggestion made is that local Christian councils should appoint liaison officers to establish contact between church authorities, the individual listener and the B.B.C. There are other interesting suggestions on the need for variety of presentation and experimentation in new forms of services and the important reminder that radio must be criticised as radio and not by some other criterion. Broadcasting as an influence on men's minds has great possibilities either of good or evil and this report demands the careful attention of Christians everywhere who realise the far-reaching effects of this revolutionary social instrument.
