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PRAGMATISM AND CHRISTIAN FAITH:

BEING A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF
RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM OR "MODERNISM"

ONE of the most remarkable features in the history of the Christian Church in this country during the last fifty years has been the consistent attempt made by those who have come to be known as religious liberals or "modernists" to break down two principles upon which the Christian religion is based; the principle of a systematised body of doctrines as the matter to be believed and the principle of an external authority as the basis of belief. To put this more briefly, modernists have striven to dispense with the creeds of the Church and to overthrow the authority of the Bible upon which these creeds are based. The destructive criticism of the Bible has been such a characteristic feature of "modernism" that it has sometimes been overlooked that "modernism" from its very nature is a destructive force which undermines all belief and is just as hostile to the classical scientific outlook and method as it is to Christianity. In its relationship to Christian belief it does not seek to improve the creeds or advance further to a deeper understanding of the sacred Scriptures. It seeks to break down. Fifty years ago Dr. B. B. Warfield of Princeton Theological Seminary drew attention to this ominous development and foretold its logical end. "Indefinite subjectivism or subjective indifferentism has no future. It is not only in its very nature a disintegrating, but also a destructive force. It can throw up no barrier against unbelief. Its very business is to break down barriers. And when that work is accomplished the floods come in."¹ To-day the prophecy of Dr. Warfield is all too evidently fulfilled. Christian civilisation has all but perished in Europe. Chaos has replaced order. Germany, the home of the destructive criticism of the Bible, has undergone the most terrible fate that has ever overtaken a great nation inside the body of Christendom. The moral fibre of the English speaking race has been weakened. There has been a departure from the standards which made the English character great. Puritan rectitude, cavalier gentlemanly courtesy, evangelical compassion and humanity are in danger of becoming

¹ B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Theology* (1932), p. 587.

qualities of a generation of Englishmen which has passed and left behind only memories of what once was. Moral flabbiness and laziness is the order of the day. Considerations of expediency are everywhere taking the place of faithfulness to principle. In all walks of life there is an increasing and widening abandonment of standards of all descriptions. Standards in art and music, standards of honesty and fidelity to the pledged word, standards of conscientious devotion to duty, standards of courtesy and good manners, standards of marital and filial loyalty, and even standards in the material and mundane things of life such as housing, have all been lowered. Why has this happened? It is the chief end of this article to try to record something of the evil which has undermined the faith of the Church visible and to endeavour to point the way to recovery.

The philosophical basis of religious liberalism, sometimes known as "modernism," or "religious rationalism," is (we are informed by such learned writers as Canon Harris¹ and Dr. Gresham Machen²) pragmatism. Pragmatism,³ Canon Harris states, is a development of Kant's teaching. It regards all human beliefs as suggested entirely by men's practical needs and as finding their sole justification in the fact that they succeed in satisfying them. A "true" theory according to pragmatism is not one which corresponds with the real nature of things and persons (which according to Kant are either "non-existent" or else "unknowable"), but one which works well in practice. "Truth" can thus be "manufactured." Under the influence of the pragmatic theory modernists regard the Christian gospel as like a piece of plasticine to be twisted and moulded to suit the assumed "needs" of "modern" man, or the assumed "modern mind". The assumed "modern mind" actually exists only in the mind of the modernist theologian. The result of the acceptance of the pragmatic philosophy is a violently anti-intellectual and unreasoning attitude to life, although many modernists have been men of marked intellectual ability. The typical modernist reaction is not to answer the arguments brought forward in defence of the Christian religion, it is rather to attack those whose study and scholarship and experience has led them to believe in the Christian faith; they are denounced as "traditionalists", "obscurantists," "fundamentalists", etc. Bergson,

¹ C. Harris, *Creeds or No Creeds?* (1922), p. 94.

² J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (1925), pp. 27 ff.

³ Harris, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

whose theory of emergent evolution is accepted by Bernard Shaw,¹ states in his book, *Emergent Evolution*²: "The intellect is characterised by a marked inability to comprehend life", etc. If this is the case we may well wonder why these supposedly learned men should spend their time on intellectual pursuits. The natural fruit of this kind of teaching is seen in the passionate anti-intellectualism which is such a marked feature of so much present day writing and speaking. To put this in another way, present day writers and speakers do not marshal their facts, put them in the right perspective and finally draw logical and convincing conclusions from them which can be accepted with assurance—they rather incline to appeal to the emotions and seek to impose their views without gaining the assent of their audience. In the realm of politics less and less attention is paid to the ascertainment of the facts of the situation and the application thereto of the Christian right principles, and more and more the tendency is to a slavish subservience to doctrinaire political theories. To apply Christian principles to intricate modern problems demands hard thinking which many are not prepared to undertake.

If the only criterion of truth is what is found to be useful, that is to say, what is found to work in practice, it follows that truth is temporary and mutable. For instance, Dr. Fosdick³ teaches that the creeds are merely the expression of the Christian experience of former generations in the thought-forms of the age in which they were formulated, and the liberalism of to-day must necessarily produce an intellectual formulation which in its turn will become the orthodoxy of to-morrow, which in its turn will have to give place to a newer liberalism, and so on, one supposes, *ad infinitum*. Of course orthodox Christians deny this with all their might; the creeds which have come down to us embody without a shadow of doubt what our forefathers believed was the truth—eternal, unchangeable, immutable, as nearly as they could apprehend it and understand it and embody it in human language. Millions of humble believers in every age have testified to the power of the Christian Gospel, embodied in these creeds, to satisfy the deepest needs of the human soul.

In a word, pragmatism, which is the philosophical basis of modernism, is the most bottomless form of unbelief imaginable,

¹ *The Rationalist Annual*, 1945, p. 95.

² Quoted by Harris, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

³ See Machen, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

denying as it does the existence of anything which can properly be called truth. It not only cuts at the roots of every form of historic Christianity; it also destroys the whole basis upon which classical science rests. Under its influence all learning must wither away and decay. Men become tired of thinking, tired of defending the truth, tired of holding up right standards. Let us stop thinking, stop believing, is the modernist cry in effect, and what a happy family we shall be. The logical result of this indifferentism is far otherwise, as we see to-day when standards of all kinds are being abandoned and the spectre of the hopeless treadmill of the collectivist State looms before our eyes. The supreme standards of our civilisation are menaced by the destroying floods—the standards of justice and law, the principles of freedom and liberty for which our fathers died, the love of truth and mercy.

In these circumstances we orthodox Christians uphold the old, yet ever new, Gospel enshrined in the great Catholic and Evangelical creeds of the Church. We are the progressives, we look for a revival which shall come, not from man, but from God; a new outburst of power which shall carry us forward to greater heights not known before. Such a revival, we believe, will come with a rediscovery of the Bible and of Biblical and Evangelical Christianity. We affirm that the old creeds are, within the limits of human fallibility in interpreting the Word of God, literally true, that is, they correspond with reality and represent the present high-water mark of our attainment unto the Truth. We repudiate with all our energy the assertion that the creeds embody merely what former generations of Christians found it convenient to believe as a result of their experience, and we affirm our faith that in due season the Holy Spirit will lead the Church of God into a yet clearer perception of the faith "once for all delivered to the saints". Such a blessing may come to all who seek with humble mind, by prayer and study of the Word, to know the Will of God.

How can we help our children? Firstly, by setting them a Christian example. Secondly it should be our privilege and duty to train up the young people committed to our charge in home, in Sabbath school, and elsewhere, in the knowledge of the Bible, and of such systematic expositions of the truth as, for example, the Shorter Catechism.

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