

# THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

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## Notes of Recent Exposition.

IN his Kerr Lectures, *Revelation and Response*, reviewed in another column, Professor E. P. DICKIE of St. Mary's College, St. Andrews, offers a study of the much-canvassed topic of 'The Finality of the Christian Religion.' Part of the study we should like to put before our readers in summary form.

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The claim of finality which he would consider is not one for the absoluteness of dogma, nor for the absoluteness of any particular Church. It is for the absoluteness of the faith as it is given in Christ. It is part of the evidence of this absoluteness, he says, that the response to the authority of Christ and the apprehension of His truth have followed different ways and assumed varied forms both in individuals and in churches.

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It may be objected that the supreme revelation in religion will come, if at all, not in the course of history but at the end of it. But in art the supreme revelation may come in the course of the series. It has been well said, 'No artist will ever surpass Pheidias—for progress exists in the world, but not in art.' It has also been well said, 'We reach in Bach, in principle, the highest point in music.' No more need finality wait in religion for the end of time.

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It may be suggested that Christianity, so far from being the final revelation of God, has been out-rivalled already by one of the other known religions.

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Take Islam. Allah is no doubt One and Omnipotent, but He is so remote from the world that

His will becomes almost the equivalent of blind destiny. His will is everything; man's life is nothing—'rotten rags and dirt.' On such a presupposition the idea of God as a loving Father can have no proper place in the Muslim mind.

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Take Buddhism. Life is regarded as nothing but illusion and the wretchedness of desire, and redemption is not redemption of life but redemption from life. And it is achieved through knowledge. Where Christianity calls for repentance, Buddhism advocates illumination. And where Christianity promises a life of fellowship with God beyond the grave, Buddhism perhaps goes no further than to say that Nirvana is the peaceful end beyond the dread of rebirth.

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Take Hinduism. It has been said that Hinduism has developed an attitude of 'comprehensive charity.' There ought, however, to be two stubborn limits to all-comprehending tolerance. The first is truth, and the second morality. And Hinduism is deficient both in intellectual earnestness and in moral illumination and moral drive. It may be pointed out in the latter connexion that the unreality of the world to the Hindu mind leads to the denial of human freedom and responsibility.

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It may also be suggested that we should seek an amalgam of the best elements in all the known faiths. But it is not syncretism that has preserved the supernatural from oblivion. A true religion, moreover, is an organic unity, and it may not be dissected into parts without destroying the life of the parts. The Christian life and character, for

which some would claim finality, cannot be separated from the Christian faith.

Because Christians have received their idea of God from the teaching and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, they know that there are definite 'limits of syncretism.' Deny the existence of these limits and you deny the Christian idea of God. Deny the absoluteness of Christianity and you deny Christianity itself. But is there anything greater than holy divine love as seen in Jesus? The redemption which is offered by Christ leaves no profound and legitimate longing unfulfilled.

There was a time when Natural Religion was in the ascendant and it was confidently believed that a true and sufficient knowledge of God could be attained by the unaided exercise of reason contemplating the data given in the natural and moral world. Roman Catholic theologians also give a high place to reason as being sufficient of itself to establish on a firm logical basis at least a theistic, if not a Christian faith. On the contrary, the Barthian school tends to depreciate reason and to set little value upon its testimony in these high regions, deeming it to be blinded and incapacitated by sin.

To most minds it will probably seem well to assume that the world will have something to tell of its Maker and will bear such traces of His handiwork as will throw some light upon His character and purpose. On this theme the Very Rev. W. R. MATTHEWS, Dean of St. Paul's, recently gave a series of wireless talks which have now been published under the title of *Signposts to God* (S.C.M.; 2s. 6d. net). These talks are most admirable in their clearness and simplicity combined with a fine persuasiveness which must have commended them to many hearers.

First of all, there are certain signposts in Nature. Not that these signposts are as clear as one could wish. The inconceivable vastness of the universe and the prevalence of suffering in it might be interpreted to mean that it was utterly indifferent to us

or even hostile. But, on the other hand, the supreme impression which Nature makes on the mind is of overwhelming splendour and glory. There are moments when you catch your breath at the loveliness, and then 'one has the impression, difficult to define, that the landscape is trying to say something, that it is expressing some meaning or some emotion, which could not be put into words, though poets sometimes get near to it and it can be, in part, translated into music. . . . Shall we say that poets are simply fanciful persons who obscure the truth? We should be very foolish if we did, for the poetical mind is one way of apprehending Reality, and we shall not know Nature as it truly is if we do not give due weight to the poets' report of it.' The mind readily responds to the sentiment expressed in Addison's great hymn:

The spacious firmament on high,  
With all the blue ethereal sky,  
And spangled heavens, a shining frame,  
Their great Original proclaim.

Further, we have to consider what science emphatically teaches, that we ourselves are part of Nature. 'It is an admitted fact that Nature has produced mind, that in Nature we find beings with the capacity to think about Nature and to understand it.' This is a very significant fact, and not to be lightly explained away by saying that Nature has the potentiality of producing mind. The question is: How does Nature come to have that potentiality? The answer which some of the world's greatest thinkers have given seems to be the only satisfactory one, namely, that Nature produces mind because it never was without mind. 'The picture which we form of Nature as a mindless, impersonal, unheeding process or machine is an illusion which arises because we think of Nature as if mind were not included in it. In short, it seems that a consideration of Nature as a whole and not one mutilated aspect of it suggests that mind was with it and in it all the time, and supports the wonderful saying of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word or thought".'

Next we may read signposts to God in history.

The record here is interminable and confusing beyond words, yet we refuse to believe that it is 'a tale told by an idiot.' We feel that it has significance. Something, we are sure, is going on. There is not only movement but progress. This, by the way, is really a Christian conception. It stands in sharp contrast to the view held by ancient and by eastern thinkers that the movement is circular. Viewing the revolutions of the heavens and the succession of the seasons, it was natural enough to suppose that the history of the world was a succession of cycles, like the turnings of a wheel. But we in this evolutionary age have a rooted conviction that something is going on.

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What is going on? Man is working out his destiny. 'Humanity is the true and only hero of history, and the writing of any history, even the most limited in scope, is an attempt to add a chapter or a footnote to the adventure of the human race.' Man is free and has a destiny. There could be no interest in the story of an automaton. The Hebrew prophets were the first great men to think seriously about man's destiny, and there is profound truth in their conviction that history is the judgment of God upon nations. 'The great civilizations and empires which have arisen have fallen by many contributory causes, but invariably they seem to have decayed from within. . . . The judgment of history is, at least partially, a moral judgment.'

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It would appear then that the goal of history is to be found in the fulfilled destiny of man, a fulfilment which seems to point beyond time. In this connexion, the turning-point of history is manifestly the coming of Jesus Christ. Nothing has been the same since. 'Ever since that beginning in Galilee there has hovered before the minds of men the ideal of the Kingdom of God. For this reason Christendom has been the most restless, the most changeful, and the most progressive of all civilizations. Always the contrast between what they have and the Kingdom of God has awakened in men a longing for what they feel is their true home.' And so history, with Christ in its midstream, becomes a signpost pointing to God and heaven.

Another notable signpost is conscience, or, more generally, the moral life. The authority of conscience has been challenged on the ground that it speaks with different voices in different people, and that its origin is very lowly. Doubtless its origin is lowly, and as John Knox said to Mary Queen of Scots: 'Conscience, Madam, requires knowledge.' But we have to judge conscience by what it has become in the best of men, and we find among them a most impressive consensus about right and wrong. The significant fact is that in every human breast there is a voice which commands and forbids, which praises or condemns.

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What does this point to? 'We seem to be led to the idea that there are two selves in question—what we call our ordinary self, largely governed by habit and convention, and a higher self, which steps in now and then and claims to take charge of the situation.' But we must go further if we are to acquit the man of conscience of being merely self-opinionated and stubborn. He acts on the conviction that in being true to his higher self he is also being loyal to a Divine Will. Thus conscience is our most valuable signpost to God. It indicates, more than do the others, 'not only that God is but *what* He is. We have a clue to His character, which perhaps was lacking in Nature and history. He is the meaning of the world, the source of the good which the saints and heroes see and serve, the ground of their assurance and the goal towards which they strive.'

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There are also signposts to God of another sort which speak with the voice of authority. Many resent the very name of authority in religion. The only authority, they say, is truth. Let that be cordially granted, but consider to what an extent we depend on authority in every sphere of life. We simply could not live unless we accepted the testimony of others who have discovered or tested things for us. The strictest scientist cannot verify everything for himself. He builds on the work of his predecessors and accepts the evidence of experts in other fields. It is utterly senseless, therefore, for any man to say: 'I will listen to no authority.'

I will think my own religion out for myself.' 'He is bound to end with a terribly meagre and shallow creed, for one very obvious reason. He has left out most of the data. He has not got the material for an answer. Does he suppose that the essential facts about the world are all disclosed to his own limited consciousness, or that his experience is equivalent to all the experience available?'

Any man of sense, conscious of his own limitations, will be profoundly impressed by the whole long history of religion in the world, and will hesitate long before he sets it down as only a vast illusion. Especially he will feel that the Hebrew religion, recorded in the Old Testament, with its complement and fulfilment in the New Testament, is profoundly significant. Then, 'there is a kind of authority in religion which is rather like the authority of the people who appreciate art or music. . . . There seem to be persons who have a peculiar sensitiveness to the spiritual world. These are the creative individuals in the history of religion.' They give a confident witness that they are in touch with God, and their witness is not lightly to be set aside. A similar authority belongs to the Bible which records such testimonies, and to the Church which enshrines and interprets them. They each in their own way witness to the Divine truth. And perhaps the most impressive thing is that they all point in the same direction, and when taken together they give a convergent testimony which presses with convincing force upon the candid mind.

In the published volume of his recent broadcast talks, *The Christian Faith* (S.C.M.; 3s. 6d. net), the Rev. J. S. WHALE, President of Cheshunt College, has a suggestive chapter on the Parable of the Importunate Seeker, or of the Churlish Neighbour, in the eleventh chapter of Luke, which is a very good example of exposition at its best. The baffling thing about the story is that it is followed by the exhortation, 'I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you,' as though the story meant: if man will not resist such persistence

indefinitely, neither will God; that prayer means pestering God, keeping at it shamelessly until our requests are granted. Is this the thing Jesus wanted men to learn when they said to Him, Lord, teach us to pray?

President WHALE puts this idea aside as a 'degraded and degrading contention,' and proceeds to set forth what he conceives the teaching of the Parable to be. First of all, he reminds us of the fact, which we should never forget, that Jesus was, among other things, a poet and an artist. The Parables are works of art, and should be approached as such. They are not allegories, every detail of which is meant to have its interpretation. We have to look at the story as we look at a canvas by Rembrandt. Rembrandt will darken heavily every part of a head in order that one spot on its brass helmet may stand out brilliantly. But he does not thereby imply that the wearer of the helmet is a black man.

And surely when Jesus tells stories which perplex us because of the dark places in them; when in one parable an unjust judge seems to stand for God and in another an unjust steward for a disciple; and when here a surly, ill-mannered man points by analogy to God, and when, apparently, intercession is likened to begging—ought we not to remember the way of the artist? The point is, how does the judge act? What does this neighbour, hearing the cry for help, do? Jesus, being a great teller of stories, does what only great masters can do with power; He deliberately gives to His story colour and high lights against a background uncompromisingly dark; He dares to bring out rightness of action by setting even wrongness of character in vivid contrast.

He is painting a picture with importunity as its theme, and if there is to be a picture at all, it will give us analogies, not of character but of action. Surely the high light in this picture is not those details which are trivial and unedifying enough in themselves; the vital point on which all the light of the picture is focussed, so that it is withdrawn from elsewhere, is that God does hear the importunate cry of man for His care and blessing.

If there is a dark shadow in the picture it is there only to show the ultimate secret of this universe in one luminous detail—bread being given, human need being met, by the manna of God's grace.

But, to get to the meaning of the story, it brings right home to us a fact which has to be disturbingly, arrestingly forced upon our notice, since we are so prone to ignore it. The deep root of all our modern problems is that we do not really believe in God. We may believe half-heartedly in the *idea* of God, as a hypothesis with which to make sense of our lives. But that is theism; it is a belief about God, but not yet belief in God, the living God who is known for what He is by what He does in history, and in our history. We have profoundly forgotten everywhere what it is to believe in Providence, Miracle, and Prayer. This Parable, with its naïve and unphilosophical picture of living communion between God and man, pulls us sophisticated people up with a jerk. We theorise about religion. Jesus lived religion. He lived in and with God. He was completely and profoundly simple in His certainty about God.

Jesus knew that He had come to mediate this knowledge to needy men and to make its redeeming power operative in their lives. But to us, is not God too often a faltering hypothesis? We speculate, we wonder, we argue about Him. We spend so much time in these days of disintegration discussing wistfully whether God may not, after all, be only the pathetic product of our imagination. This Parable, which likens the deepest things in religion to running round the corner to ask help from a neighbour forces us to see that argument about religion is not religion.

There is to-day a great deal of what John Smith, the Cambridge Platonist, called 'this hovering and fluttering up and down about divinity.' There is a great deal of intellectual anxiety about the problems of religion. And, of course, the problems are there and are inescapable. But what Jesus suggests is that you can only know God by going down on your knees. Apart from this all our argumentation is the empty clamour of words,

rather than silence and awe before the majesty and comfort of the Word of God: much rattling of milk-cans but little milk: much talk of food values, vitamins and diet analysis, but little living bread into which a man can get his teeth and so sustain his very life. It is all the difference between lingering at home, uncertain whether our neighbour might let us have a loaf to meet our immediate need, and going and getting it from him.

And there is a final thing in this Parable which is the dominant truth of the whole matter. The Parable turns on the word importunity, the word which is the undoing of many who read it. What are we to make of it? In a sentence the meaning seems to be that this God and Father of Jesus Christ and of us all can help us only when we go to Him demanding His help. Even God cannot feed us with the bread of life unless we go to Him with open mouths. Forcible feeding and freedom cannot go together. Only those who hunger and thirst after God can be filled of God—if man is truly free and if God is love. And the story of the surly neighbour who holds back for a time, though not edifying in detail, is most certainly edifying as the mirror of an eternal truth.

Christian history in all its range and variety is a commentary on what Jesus was here proclaiming. Listen to Martin Luther on the 118th psalm: 'The psalmist said: I cried unto the Lord. Thou must learn to cry. Come now, thou lazy rascal, fall down upon thy knee and set forth thy need with tears before God.' You can have God's gift of Himself only as you greatly desire it: as you ask, seek, knock. We find this Parable difficult because its details are difficult. But see it in terms of the spiritual order to which it points. In that spiritual order you can have only what you desire earnestly. Importunity is the only key which will open the door of that world. God has put the door there, not that you may be denied admission, but that by knocking and demanding you may know how blessed a thing it is to enter in. In reverence be it said that only by assault upon Himself can we receive the things which God prepares eternally for them that love Him.